

# Bandwagon

THE JOURNAL OF THE CIRCUS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, INC.

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER 2007





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**FRED D. PFENING, JR. EDITOR AND PUBLISHER**  
**Fred D. Pfening III, Managing Editor**

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### THE FRONT COVER

Lucio Cristiani is acknowledged as one of the greatest riders of the twenty century. Although not the oldest brother, he was the leader of the family. He died in 1992.

This photo was taken on Rudy Bros. Circus in 1973 by Rev. L. David Harris.

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### CORRECTION

The Kirk Circus article in the last issue stated the show played three weeks in 1978 was incorrect. The show actually closed in 1977.

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# "POPCORN" GEORGE W. HALL, A WISCONSIN SHOWMAN

By Ruth Ann Montgomery

Col. George W. Hall, (1837-1918) sometimes known as "Popcorn George" is one of Evansville, Wisconsin's most famous men. Hall was a circus owner and animal trainer known throughout the United States, Mexico, and the Caribbean.

No exaggeration is necessary in describing the life of George W. Hall. His adventures were real and courageous. Hall's greatness is measured as much by his business success, as by his generosity to the poor and disabled.

Like any showman, he loved publicity and the drama of the circus world. With good management and a keen sense of what the circus-going public wanted to see, Hall developed a family circus business. The Hall circus grew from a small traveling museum of stuffed birds and farm animals to a railroad circus with a menagerie of exotic animals from around the world.

George Washington Hall and his animal friends. Author's collection.



His love of show business was passed on to several generations of his family. From a very young age, Hall's children, grandchildren and great grandchildren took part in the activities of the circus. In the 1870s, Evansville began to claim the Hall circus as its own.

George W. Hall knew the circus business at many levels. He was born in Lowell, Massachusetts, December 5, 1837 to Joseph and Susan Nichols Hall. He was one of six children. Joseph and Susan Hall moved to Wisconsin in 1859 and purchased a farm in Magnolia.

Young George had his first taste of circus life at the age of 10 and until his death in 1918, he never lost his love for the business. According to the *Commemorative Biographical Record of Rock County*, published in 1909, "he would run away from home in the spring, spend the summer with some circus, and then return home in the fall to spend the winter at home."

For a short time he worked in a candy factory in Boston, then went to Concord and started selling popcorn on the trains. In 1855, he went to New York to sell popcorn. He made contact with Solon Robinson, an editor at the *New York Tribune*. Robinson encouraged him to sell popcorn in New York and after purchasing a supply of the snack, George became a popcorn vendor, also selling his goods on the trains. Horace Greeley, another famous *New York Tribune* editor, was credited with giving him the name "Popcorn" George.

In March, 1855, at the age of 19, George Hall married Sarah Wilder. Sarah shared her husband's enthusiasm for the circus business. She was an active participant in the circus, raising four

children and often traveling with her husband.

Their oldest son, George, Jr. was born in 1857, a daughter, Ida, was born in Evansville in 1861. A second son, Charles, was born in 1864 and a daughter, Jessie May, in 1871. All of the children eventually entered the circus business.

In 1860, Hall joined the Richard Sands wagon show. From New York,

Hall newspaper ad used in 1884. Circus World Museum collection.

**COL. G. W. HALL'S**  
**BIG UNITED STATES & GREAT EASTERN**  
**8 CONSOLIDATED SHOWS 8**  
**TWO RING CIRCUS,**  
**MUSEUM and MENAGERIE**  
Making one Grand Institution of Art, Science Knowledge, and Amusement

**Three Times Larger than Ever**  
**\$50,000**  
Of Expenditure added this year, 1884. Will exhibit in Two Separate Rings and on one Stage at one time.

**MASTER GEORGE REHN.**  
The wonder of the world—A boy with two living heads on one body. We carry the first and only genuine

**SACRED ELEPHANT**  
Ever placed on public exhibition, and the only animal of the kind ever seen within the bounds of Christian civilization.

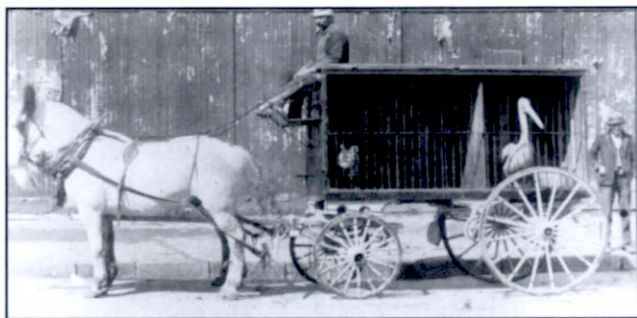
We have **ROMEO**, the smallest Elephant now on Exhibition.

We Have the **FINEST** Equipped Train of Cars in the **WORLD**  
We carry the Largest troupe of educated Dogs in the world  
\$10,000 standing challenge that we have the only real living

**SLOTH**  
Now on exhibition is with Col. G. W. Hall's Two Ring Circus, Museum and Menagerie Black Joe, and their wonderful performing Pintos and Mules.  
Oilett Brothers in their wonderful Head Balancing Act.  
Mons. King the man with an Iron Jaw, in his astonishing feat of heavy weight lifting with his teeth.  
Harry Castello in his wonderful ceiling walking act.  
The beautiful, daring and angelic Miss Maggie De Ring, the winged fairy and goddess of the clouds. The people perfectly paralyzed. In this act Miss Maggie De Ring stands alone and unapproachable.  
She receives the largest salary of any woman in the world, appearing at every performance of Col. G. W. Hall's Two Ring Circus. Worth getting 100 miles to see. Excursion trains and reduced rates on all railroads to and from this Great Show. A popular resort for ladies and children. 100 animals and more. Consult the Centre Point, 3d in number.  
J.F.C. 2530 Balloon ascension and High wire walking before each performance.  
Admission, 50c.; Children, 25c.

**At Baraboo, Tuesday, July 1st, '84**





Overland cage used by Hall & McFlinn in 1880's. Pfening Archives.

the circus toured through Canada and what was then the West. The Sands show played in Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota and Wisconsin. That winter, Hall lived with his father on the farm in Magnolia.

In 1861, Hall went out with Jerry Mabie, a circus owner from Delavan, Wisconsin and the next year, Hall worked for the George F. Bailey and the Van Amburgh shows.

The winter of 1862-63, Hall rented a store front in Madison Wisconsin and opened a small museum. For the next two years, he took his own show on the road in the summer.

His first spring on his own, Hall had to contend with a very rainy season. He headed for the lead mining region in the southwest corner of Wisconsin. His operating expenses were \$250 to \$300 a day. It was a short season. He then put together a small side show with the J. M. French Circus.

Hall once described the routine of the wagon show to a reporter: "We invariably had a 3 o'clock breakfast on short rides, but if the drive to the next town we had billed was twenty-five or thirty miles we started away in the evening as quick as we got through with our performance. All long trips were made by wagon trail."

Some towns were so small that there were no hotel accommodations for the circus personnel. The women and children were housed in the homes of the villagers and the men slept under the wagons.

When the Hall troupe was not traveling with another circus, or performing on their own, they made the rounds of

the county fairs. In the winter, the circus disbanded and Hall would either rent a store for a museum in a larger city or return to his father's home in Magnolia. There he would trap animals and sell the

fur.

Putting a show together was an expensive undertaking. Hall estimated that it had taken \$10,000 to produce his first circus. Equipment, horse riders, acrobats, clowns, and animals were all part of even the smallest shows.

An August 1871 article in the *Evansville (Wisconsin) Review* gave the salaries of circus performers. Those in the highest salary ranges were with the larger circuses. First class horse riders could expect \$100 a week, plus their traveling expenses. "A good rider who has three or four smart children or apprentices can make a very large salary." Acrobats and clowns were paid from \$20 to \$150 per week.

The *Evansville Review*, February 11, 1874, reported that Hall was making preparations to go into the show business on a much larger scale than he had ever done before. "Mr. Hall has all the energy and tack of a showman; and his keen eye to business will ensure him success in his favorite undertaking," the *Review* reporter predicted.

Wagon shows, such as those owned in the early days by George Hall, played smaller towns. When Hall began putting his show together for the 1874 season, he spent several months having his carriages and cages repaired and painted and four large tents were prepared. A large collection of "embalmed birds, embracing many rare specimens" that had been on display in a local jewelry store was one of the major attractions.

Chapin's Champion Roman Hippodrome, Asiatic Caravan and Grand Golden Show, (owned by another local man whose first name was never mentioned in the news articles) traveled with Hall's Great California Exposition in the summer of 1874. Their first show was on Friday, June 19, in Evansville. It was the first Hall circus to perform before Evansville audiences.

In 1876, Hall married Marie Louise Tolen in St. Louis. They had one daughter, Mable, born in 1878. George Hall's second wife, known as Lu, became an active part of his circus as well.

In November 1878, Hall spent a short time in Evansville to settle up some real estate dealings. Soon after he headed south to catch up with his show in St. Louis, then went to Texas. Like many other showmen, he toured the southern states in the winter.

Hall's band and performers in 1908. Pfening Archives.





Some years, he spent the entire winter season in the South. In 1879, he opened a museum in a store front on Main Street in Memphis. He happened to be there on January 6, 1880, when a terrible fire left one fireman dead.

George Hall's generous spirit came to the front following the disaster. He gave a benefit for the widow and children of the fireman killed in the fire. The city of Memphis was overwhelmed by his generosity and decided to give him a medal.

An article about the ceremony was printed in the *Memphis Public Ledger* on February 2, 1880 and copied by the *Janesville Gazette* on February 6, 1880. The medal was presented to George Hall by the fire chief "in recognition of the bounteous sum he bestowed on the widow and children of the late fireman Ed Leonard." Hall proudly wore the pin for the rest of his life.

The medal was a gold eagle, suspended from a cross pin. The eagle held a wreath in its beak and inside the Etruscan gold wreath was the inscription, "Presented to G. W. Hall by the fire department of Memphis, Tenn. for giving a benefit in the aid of the widow and orphans of the fireman killed at the Main Street fire, January 6, 1880."

At the ceremony, Popcorn George displayed his modesty and generosity. He also told a great deal about his work. To the mayor of Memphis and the people of the city, Hall said: "Gentlemen, I am not worthy of this high honor. The people of your city put the money in my museum treasury for the very purpose you say I gave it. The part I played had good return.

"Why a letter you gave me to the Mayor of New Orleans secured permission for my great moral entertainment to exhibit free of charge in that great city until the first of April next. I haven't done a thing to deserve it. Never since the day I began the struggle of life



Hall's performers around 1887. Pfening Archives.

on my own account as a seller of popcorn on railway trains have I been so embarrassed as on this occasion.

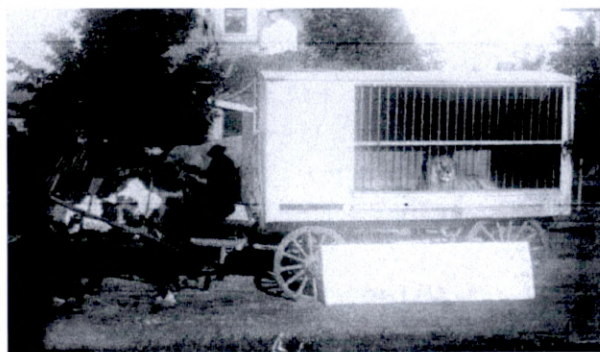
"I can stand in front of my museum and expatriate for hours upon the beauties of natural history; the animal species, and the promotion of science through instruction received by all who visit my collection of curiosities, but I am not a speech maker when it comes to a thing like this. Here Mr. Fire Chief, take this hundred dollar bill and use it for those little children whose father lost his valuable life while earning a pittance to buy them bread."

Then Hall handed the fire chief the hundred dollars. Several of those present wiped tears from their eyes.

This was the first of many notices of Hall's generosity to the poor. He often gave benefit performances to support organizations that gave to those less fortunate. Civil War veterans and orphans were always given free admission to his shows.

In the 1880s, the Hall family pur-

Cage used by Hall in 1908. Author's collection.



chased property near Evansville for a winter quarters. George Hall Jr. purchased 20 acres of land in Section 34 of Union township from L. H. Walker for \$1,250. This became the headquarters of the Hall Circus at the south end of what is today First Street.

Animals in the Hall circus included a trained hog named Charley. Hall claimed he had shown the animal to more than 400,000 people. When it became too old to perform, the animal was sold to the firm of Smith & Eager, a general store and grocery owned by Almeron Eager and William Smith. What the store owners did with the trained pig was never reported.

A mountain lion was one of the larger animals in the circus. The cat had come from Texas and measured seven feet from head to tail. Another curiosity was a gander that could perform card tricks. Monkeys and lions were also part of the show.

The winter quarters was also a working farm. When tobacco became a popular cash crop, Hall was one of the first to raise it. He also had livestock and announced sales of pure-bred stock on his farm in a November 1882 ad in the *Evansville Review*.

Hall also began to accumulate real estate in Evansville. In 1882, he purchased land to build a boarding house near the Seminary. The *Evansville Review* predicted that "Mr. Hall will always have his building profitably occupied."

In April 1883, a former *Evansville Review* printer, C. N. Wells, joined the Hall circus as a clown. When the show was ready for the season, Hall decided that there were already too many circuses in Wisconsin and took his circus south to join the George DeHaven show.

In 1884, Hall went to New York to purchase some exotic animals from one of the shows he had followed. The Van Amburgh menagerie auction sale was held in March



1884 and Hall purchased 10 to 12 thousand dollars worth of animals, including two Egyptian camels, two African dromedaries, an East India elephant and a South American jaguar.

The animals were included when his show went on the road the following summer. Performers included Charles and Viola Lane, a husband and wife team of trapeze

artists. While performing in Eau Claire, the Lanes had a terrible accident. Their trapeze had been suspended 20 feet into the air. Charles was swinging from the trapeze and reaching out for Viola when the support poles gave way and the performers came crashing to the ground.

The gas lights that hung from the center pole also came down, spilling gasoline on the performers, and the ground. Flames from the gas lights spread across the dirt floor, nearly reaching the tent canvas.

The audience began to rush for the exits. Amid the excitement, some members of the audience and the circus crew had the presence of mind to try to extinguish the fire before it reached the side walls of the tent.

The impromptu rescuers threw sand on the fire. Others helped the Lanes escape from the flames. A serious disaster was averted. The Lanes were shaken, but suffered no permanent injuries.

The following year, Hall again joined up with George DeHaven's Circus. In the winter of 1884-85 the Hall and George DeHaven circuses rented a ship and traveled to the Caribbean.

Mary Louise Hall, George's second wife, wrote a letter to her mother from St. Pierre Island of Martinique on January 26, 1885 which was published in the February 17, 1885 *Evansville Review*.

According to her report, the Hall circus had played for four days at St. Johns in Antigua. There were no horses on the island and to get the circus to its lot, all the equipment had to be transported by carts drawn



The Hall side show around 1908. Author's collection.

by men who lived on the island. The carts were so small that they carried only one animal cage in each.

While the animals were being transported on the small carts, one of the islanders became curious about the animals and opened one of the bear cages. The bear escaped and panic broke out. The islanders were so frightened that they never attempted to open another cage. After the fiasco with the bear, the trainers decided that the elephant would be brought ashore at night.

In the summer of 1885, his show was in Chicago. The following December, Hall traveled to Mexico with his circus. He had planned to spend the winter in Galveston, Texas, but a large fire destroyed the area he had intended to use for setting up the circus. While the fire raged, Hall moved his circus five times to escape the flames.

From Galveston the Halls went to Nuevo Laredo and crossed the border into Mexico. They arrived in Monterey and the company found itself in the midst of a civil war. They stayed for eight days and Hall telegraphed Mexican President Diaz to send troops to protect the Americans.

Diaz complied and sent troops. Hall told the reporter for the *Evansville Enterprise* that "excitement kills the show business." He had seen five men killed and ten or twelve wounded during his travels in Mexico.

Not wanting to give up the busi-

ness in Mexico, Hall moved his circus by railroad 400 miles across Mexico. He showed in cities from Zacatecas to Mexico City, returning to the United States the following spring. Some of his circus personnel had been sick with small pox and many of the towns in New Mexico and Colorado quarantined the show, not letting the circus perform. Hall decided to close the show and shipped it home to Evansville.

By 1887, Hall seemed to have decided on a quieter life. He sold his show to George DeHaven for \$10,000. Not wanting to give up the show business entirely, he kept an Arabian dromedary, and a few other animals.

That winter he spent most of his leisure time trapping mink along the streams of Allen's Creek. After he trapped the animals, he tanned their pelts and had the furs made into clothing for himself and his family. It was only a temporary rest from the circus business.

What made Hall's circuses successful was his ability to be creative in the face of adversity. He had the foresight and financial acumen to purchase circus animals and property that others passed on.

His gregarious personality put him in contact with many others in the show business. This allowed Hall to learn trade secrets and to be in touch with economic conditions throughout the country. When one area of the country was in economic distress and the fortunes of the circus business seemed low, Hall would change the route to what would seem to be a more profitable itinerary.



Hall set up his show tents in Evansville in October 1887 where he showed a collection of Mexican "curiosities" which included Navajo blankets, Mexican lace, Indian war clubs and other items he had collected as souvenirs during his Mexican journeys. Hall also displayed some rare tropical birds and an "educated pig and gander." Admission was 10 cents.

While his family performed various acts, including tumbling and daring feats on the trapeze, Hall explained the various animals on exhibit in the menagerie. The *Evansville Review* reporter noted that "Mr. Hall possesses a genius in that line and manifested an apparent delight in doing so."

The show was not well attended, and the proceeds of the program were twenty-two dollars. Hall donated his time and that of his performers so that all of the money could be used to purchase food for those in need. Hall used the receipts to purchase 23 sacks of flour which he personally delivered to poor families in the village.

The winter of 1887-1888, the Hall family remained in Evansville and Pop Hall's energies were devoted to farming. He advertised "rice popcorn" for sale and mentioned that it was especially good for old people because the kernels "popped up so tender." He also reported the first hatch of chicks in Evansville in January 1888.

George Hall, Jr., his oldest son, was already beginning to collect animals to form his own show. He had at least one alligator and when it died, the carcass was given to William Campbell.

William and his father, Byron Campbell, also collected curiosities and had enough to open a museum themselves. The Campbells had the alligator stuffed and mounted and put it on display in their Campbell & Sons meat market.

The third generation of circus performers and owners was born to the Hall family in the 1880s. George Jr. married Lida Ward in 1882 at Dubuque, Iowa. Frank, their first son, was born in December 23, 1883.



George W. Hall Jr., on left, with elephant Pearl in 1890s. Pfening Archives.

On March 28, 1886, Grace, their daughter, was born and on March 19, 1897, Charles Russell, a second son was born. The children began traveling with their parents' circus at a very early age.

By 1888, two Hall circuses were head quartered in Evansville. With two George Hall circuses on the road, newspaper reporters added "Pop," "Popcorn" or "Col." to George Hall Sr.'s name to distinguish him from his son. The *Evansville Tribune* reported that George Hall, Jr. had started out for Ohio with his show in April 1888. In June of that same year, Col. George "Popcorn" Hall set up his

An 1888 Hall newspaper ad. Circus World Museum collection.

**WEDNESDAY, JULY 18**  
1888

COL.

**G. W. HALL'S CIRCUS**

— AND —

**BINCLEY'S**

EUROPEAN

**Monster Menagerie**

Presenting at all times more than advertised and introducing ultra-sensational array of pre-eminent performances, carefully collected, acceptably presented and proudly submitted to the public without fear of other than an unanimous commendation. A quadruple exhibit in one odd-time ring. A show of exclusive and marvellous features. Absolutely original and marvellous novelties.

**REQUIRING 10 ACRES OF TENTS IN WHICH TO EXHIBIT!**

With seating capacity for unlimited thousands. Triple arena! Theatre! Bicycle Collage! Russian Roller Skaters, World's Horse Congress, Trained Animals and Acrobats! Carnival of Horses. Performing Monkeys, Dogs, Goats and Trained Wild Animals, Trick Stallions, Ponies and Mules.

**A Dozen Clowns! Ponderous Performing Elephants!**

Phenomenal mid-air and aerial champions from every noted European capital. Every promise a sacred pledge. As Chaste as it is marvellous.

**DOORS OPEN AT 1 AND 7 P. M. PERFORMANCE ONE HOUR LATER**

**An Unparalleled Resplendent Street Parade Free to All at 10 A. M.**

OPEN DENS OF WILD BARE HEASTS WITH TRAINERS.

**PROF. ZANORA** will make an Ascension to his Balloon and while in mid air will make a descent of 100 feet with his parachute to the earth. After the procession is over.

**A Big 50-Cent Show for 25 Cents.**

tents at the corner of Root and Wallace Streets in Chicago.

*Goodall's Daily Sun*, a Chicago paper, reported that Hall had "one of the best and certainly the largest of all the cheap price shows that have ever visited Chicago and vicinity." This was a return visit as Hall had his set his circus tents on the same lot in 1883.

The *Daily Sun* gave Hall credit for originating the 10 cent admission charge for circuses. The *Sun* went on to report that Hall's show had "large circus tents that will hold 10,000 people and the menagerie is a well selected one embracing many of the choicest and most costly animals." The show used the title G. W. Hall's Circus and Bingley's English Menagerie, and traveled on five railroad cars. The circus did not have an elephant. Nevertheless, a newspaper reporter promised the *Daily Sun's* readers that Hall's thirty acts would be immensely entertaining.

"Pop" Hall spent the winter of 1888-1889 in the South. During the fall elections of 1888, he was in Memphis where he got into trouble with the federal authorities when he was falsely accused of illegal voting and intimidation at the polls. Hall was arrested in Little Rock and taken back to Memphis to be put in jail.

When the Federal marshals and Hall arrived in Memphis, Hall contacted the city fire chief. The chief remembered Hall's generosity to the fireman's widow and children after the deadly fire in 1880 and set to work immediately to post bail for the generous circus owner. There were several Memphis cotton merchants who posted a \$10,000 bond for Hall's release.

He returned to his show and continued on through the South until March 1889 when the circus ran into trouble. Richard Conover noted in *Wisconsin's Unique Heritage* that the Hall and Bingley Circus met its demise in Atlanta on March 28, 1889 when it was attached by its employees for back wages. The show was auctioned, but as the claims were only \$1,500 and \$4,500 was realized at the sale,



Hall had at least a little money to organize a new company with Sam McFlinn.

He returned to Evansville. For a few months, Col. Hall concentrated on his farm and once again raised a crop of rice popcorn. In July, he offered 500 bushels of rice popcorn for sale at \$1 a bushel. That same month he also advertised that he wanted to buy 100 "cheap horses that will stand the road." He was about to take his show on the road once again.

This time he took Sam McFlinn as his partner. McFlinn had trained horses and dogs. The Hall-McFlinn circus gave a performance in Evansville in August 1889 and announced they were heading south for the winter. The trip was interrupted by the legal proceedings involving Hall and the federal government.

In the early winter of 1890, the charge of the illegal voting against Hall came before the federal courts. Such prominent Evansville men as Nelson Winston, former banker and general store owner; Matt Broderick, livery stable owner; C. E. Lee, harness maker; and James V. Sonn, pharmacist, were called to testify in the United States District Court in Memphis on behalf of Hall. In February 1890, Hall was acquitted of all charges. The trial resulting from the false accusations had cost him nearly \$5,000, but he was free.

In the spring of 1890, George Hall, Jr. was ready to set out from Evansville with his show once again. In April 1890, he loaded a railroad car filled with show stock and shipped it to Warrenburg, Missouri, where he joined the Whitting Brothers Show.

After spending the early spring and summer on the road, George, Jr. returned to Evansville. He had replaced the alligator that had ended up in Campbell's meat market and while he was home, the water-loving creature escaped from its cage. The July 8, 1890 *Evansville Tribune*

announced that Hall's alligator "is now roaming at large in our village. He would be a dangerous animal to meet especially by children."

Many people thought the animal would be found in the mill pond, a favorite swimming place for young boys. However, it was discovered in the marsh, south of the village. To capture the animal, a fence board was crammed into its mouth and a chain was put around its neck. The alligator was led back to Hall's farm and once again confined to its cage.

Charles organized a "Grand Railroad Show" which opened in Evansville in May, renting Dr. Evans' pasture, north of the Evans home on West Main Street.

The circus band led the street parade to the grounds where the show was held. The program opened with a horizontal bar trapeze act and a tumbling act. Frank McCart performed juggling and trapeze acts.

Following its opening in Evansville, the show went on the road. By June, the circus had traveled across the prairies and reached Wyoming where a private "pleasure garden" leased the show.

That August, Col. Hall returned home to Evansville so he could begin preparing for another southern tour. According to a *Janesville Gazette* report, the trip would include the Caribbean.

Hall hired local wagon maker, Joel W. Morgan, to repair cages. Caleb Lee made new harnesses for the horses and George Backenstoe painted the

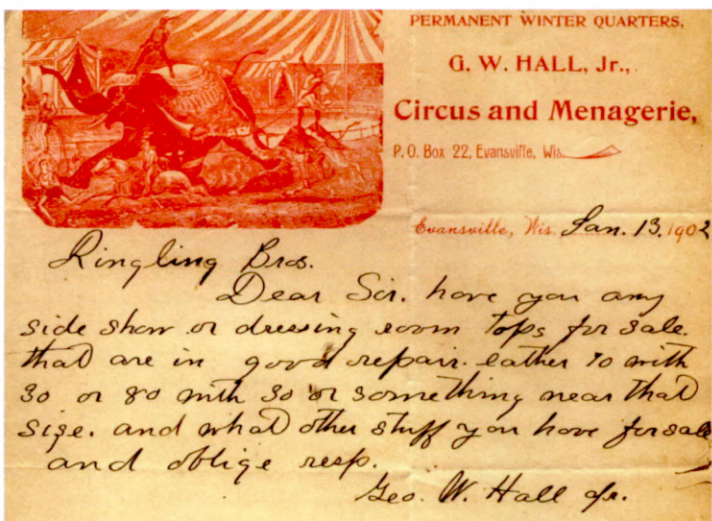
wagons and cages. The troupe traveled by four railroad cars. Backenstoe was also hired to paint the railroad cars before the show headed south.

While the preparations for the southern tour were taking place, Hall, Sr. heard of a large sale of wild animals. Always looking for new exhibits for his menagerie, he went to St. Louis in early August 1891. He made several purchases and a few weeks later cages of wild animals arrived at the Evansville depot.

The purchases included two lions and an elk. He also purchased a Brahma cow which he billed as the sacred cow of India.

In September, the *Evansville Tribune* reported that "Our town is full of showmen and show fixtures preparing for the departure of Hall's great combination shows." Hall, son Charles, and the Sam McFlinn Show had joined forces for the winter.

Once again, Col. Hall displayed his generous spirit to the people of Evansville. The Hall-McFlinn Circus



Letterhead used by Hall Jr. in 1902. Pfening Archives.

In October, George Hall, Jr. and his son, seven-year-old son Frankie, went to join Kohl and Middleton's dime museum in Chicago. They took along their trained pig, goose and snakes. Like his father, young George was always on the look-out for different animals and performers.

In February 1891, George, Jr. purchased more circus paraphernalia from the Ringling Brothers Circus in Baraboo. He made plans to go on the road in the spring.

While his oldest son was working with shows in the North, George Hall, Sr. moved south and exhibited in Galveston, Liberty and Beaumont Texas in March of 1891. He returned to Evansville in April and offered his son Charles a start in the circus business. George Sr.'s daughter Jessie, who had married another circus performer, Frank McCart, traveled with Charles' show.

"Pop" Hall, the McCarts and



gave two performances in Evansville and the proceeds from the first day were given to build a band stand near the Central House. The second day's proceeds were given for the relief of the poor of Evansville.

The winter of 1891-1892, Hall played in Florida cities, including Tampa and Jacksonville. George Hall sent orange blossoms and palmettos to his friends in the North. Almeron Eager, who often acted as his financial agent, reported that the Halls had purchased more than \$5,000 worth of cars, camels and show animals, and they expected to purchase an elephant.

The combined shows enjoyed great success in Florida. Income was ample enough to take care of the expenses and to purchase the new equipment. "This success of Messrs. Hall is not only gratifying to themselves, but quite as much so to their many friends at home," an *Evansville Review* reporter noted in February 1892. The combination with McFlinn was dissolved in the spring of 1892, ending a four year partnership during which the show may have traveled on as many as sixteen railroad cars.

In the spring, the Halls returned to Evansville to organize their shows for northern tours in the summer. All of the children by Col. Hall's first wife were out on the road when they received word that their mother had died. Sarah Wilder Hall had remarried following her divorce from "Pop" Hall in the 1870s. She was living in Kansas City at the time of her death.

Accompanied by her two daughters and their husbands, the body of Sarah H. Wilder Hall Pettengill was brought back to Evansville for burial. The obituary notice in the September 20, 1892 *Evansville Tribune* told of the arrival of Sarah's children for her funeral. Daughters Ida and Jessie were in Kansas City with their husbands Tod Blair and Frank McCart.

George, Jr. was in Dubuque, Iowa and he sent his wife Lida to represent him at the funeral. Charles' shows were playing in Oklahoma and he also arrived by train in time for his mother's funeral. She was buried in the cemetery plot pur-



The five car Hall show in 1893 in Las Vegas, New Mexico. Museum of New Mexico collection.

chased by George Jr.

In 1894, George Jr. took out a small wagon show, possibly using the same equipment that his brother Charles used in 1893. Conover writes: "None of the Halls ever seemed to be lured by the 'bigger and better next year' fever, so we find that many years later Junior's show, like his father's, was not much larger than it was when he first opened it. At its peak it never had more than four cages, one elephant, an 80-foot round top with a 30 or 40-foot middle piece, and thirty head of baggage stock to move it overland. After about twenty years at this pace, George Jr. retired and turned the property over to his son Frank."

Tragedy would fill the lives of Col. Hall and his children during the next few years. His daughter Ida had Bright's disease, an inflammation of the kidneys, also called nephritis. In June 1894, Hall persuaded Ida to go to a Chicago hospital for treatment. Her father and husband accompanied her to Chicago. Within a short while she returned home. The newspaper announcement of her arrival noted that "she received but little help or encouragement and is still suffering greatly from Bright's disease."

After his attempts to get treatment for Ida, "Pop" Hall returned to his show in the East. While his show was in Cincinnati, Hall heard that a circus owned by E. F. Davis was in

financial trouble. He contacted Davis and offered to purchase the entire show. Davis agreed and offered to include an elephant named Empress that was leased from the Empire Printing Company of Chicago. Hall took charge of the elephant, as well as the other circus goods.

One evening Hall was feeding his own elephants when Empress became jealous and attacked Hall. The animal knocked him down with her trunk. The fall had knocked Hall unconscious and before help arrived, Empress pressed him to the ground, breaking his right hip. Rescuers finally arrived and took the injured man to a hospital.

Hall was fearless and optimistic about the elephant, even if it had attacked him. He contacted the Empire Printing Company while he was still in the hospital recovering from his injuries. The owners agreed to sell him the elephant for \$1,000. In return, Hall promised he would not sue Empire Printing for damages. Hall's gain was a rogue elephant that he could not tame. He sold Empress in the summer of 1895 for \$2,000.

While Col. Hall was bed-ridden with the broken hip a second tragedy occurred. His daughter Ida died on July 9, 1894 at the age of thirty three. Her funeral was held in Evansville and because of his injuries, Hall could not attend. Ida's brother George was out with his show, and could also not attend the funeral.

The winter of 1894, Hall returned to Florida. The previous January he had purchased two acres of land in



Tampa and told the *Tampa Times* that he intended to make the town his winter headquarters. The *Times* reported that he intended to fence the property, build houses for his performers and stables for the horses and other animals.

His circus animals arrived back in Evansville in April 1895. When one of the camels passed by a horse that was hitched to a post beside the street, the horse collapsed and died of fright.

In May, two different Hall circuses once again left Evansville. Col. Hall announced that he planned to retire and his son Charles would run a railroad show while George, his other son, would operate a wagon show. It was the first of several notices over the next few years that the elder Hall would give up the show business.

George Sr.'s circus toured on a six-car train. In 1895 he day and dated Barnum and Bailey's Circus for a week around Chicago. When asked if he thought that this had been a mistake, he responded: "No, even though my train is not as long as Jim Bailey's, it is just as wide."

George Hall, Jr. announced in April 1895 that he had purchased his father's show animals. The new show was billed as Geo. W. Hall Jr. Great Trained Animal Show Museum and Menagerie and an *Evansville Tribune* ad announced that the first exhibition would be in Evansville on May 4, 1895.

The younger Hall advertised that his show included his father's elephants, camels and other animals. George, Jr.'s menagerie advertised the only living gorilla in America, three performing elephants, Queen, Empress and Palm, and 16 cages of other animals.

Hall's brother-in-law Frank McCart performed as a slack wire walker, acrobat and clown. A Prof. Showers, with his two young daughters who were horseback riders and trapeze performers, were also with the show. When it left Evansville the show's name had changed to the Hall & Showers Circus.

In early February, 1896, Charles Hall was traveling with his circus in the southern states. He stopped his show in Meridian, Mississippi, too sick with pneumonia to continue.

His father was notified by telegram that Charles was critically ill and went immediately to see him. Charles died, however, before his father arrived.

Col. Hall accompanied his son's body back to Evansville. Charles' body was prepared for burial and taken to the Hall home at the south edge of Evansville. A large funeral procession led by Evansville's Black Hussar Band marched from the Hall farm to the Methodist Church on South Madison Street. The church was nearly filled with young men who came to pay their final respects to Charles. The Methodist choir sang several selections, and Rev. G. W. White preached from the text "So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom."

Following the service, the Black Hussar Band escorted the grieving family and friends to Maple Hill Cemetery where Charles was buried beside his mother and sister Ida.

Despite the tragedies that befell his family, Col. Hall, who was now 59 years old, came out of retirement to reorganize Charles' circus. He could not resist the call of the road, he once told a reporter.

In March 1896, the Evansville newspapers reported that Col. Hall was going to take his circus by railroad to California and Mexico. He would be traveling once again with Sam McFlinn and "educated ponies," dogs, bears, deer, goats, and monkeys.

Col. G. W. Hall's menagerie, which he had reacquired from his son George, included the elephants Queen and Palm, the latter advertised as the former's baby. Other ani-

mals included a baby camel, and a "man eating" lion named Nero. The show was billed as the Hall and McFlinn New United States Shows.

They gave their first show in May in Evansville. McFlinn's Japanese pony Metoo was in training to make a 75 foot slide down a wire that ran diagonally from the top of the circus tent to the ground. There was to be a street parade, balloon ascension and trapeze act before the show began.

Like most field show owners, Hall and McFlinn hired an advance agent to go ahead of their show to advertise its arrival in a city. Thomas R. Perry, the show's general agent, traveled several days ahead of the show. The advance railroad car carried about ten people, including five bill-posters, a press agent, and other advertising personnel.

Though he was crippled and in ill health, Col. Hall once again answered the call of the circus ring and headed out with his "mammoth railroad show."

In the late 1890s, both Halls, Sr. and Jr., were on the road with circuses. For over two years, from the summer of 1896 to September 1898, Col. Hall and his partner McFlinn traveled in the southern United States and Mexico with a railroad show. During much of the time, Hall's daughter Jessie and her husband Frank McCart traveled with them. Also in the company were Pop Hall's wife Lou, and their daughter Mable.

The George W. Hall, Jr. show stayed closer to home, touring on its own in the late spring and summer and playing the county fair circuit in the fall. In early August 1896, George, Jr. arrived in Evansville, packed away his circus property and reorganized his fairground show for the fall season.

Hall letterhead used in 1896. Circus World Museum collection.





George, Jr. advertised that he wanted to purchase 50 tons of hay and straw and one thousand bushels of oats and corn to feed his animals through the winter months. Circus historians believe that the availability of food for the circus animals is one reason Wisconsin was home to so many circuses.

When the fair season was finished, George, Jr. returned to Evansville. In November 1896, George, Jr. purchased 40 acres of land in the northwest corner of section 22 in Union township. It was located just north of Evansville at the end of what is today Elmer Road. Hall bought the land from local banker George L. Pullen for \$1,600 and used it as the winter headquarters for his circus.

During this same time, the circus operated by Col. George Hall and McFlinn traveled by railroad through the southern states and Mexico. The Hall & McFlinn Circus had fifty trained ponies, dogs, bears, monkeys and the elephants Queen and Palm. Occasional news articles appeared over the next two years concerning this circus, but it was George Hall, Jr. who received most of the publicity from the Evansville newspapers during this period.

News reports indicated that the Halls kept in touch with each other and shared their animals over the next few years. When the 1897 spring season began, Col. Hall was in New Orleans and the local papers reported that George Jr. shipped two of his camels to his father's show in Louisiana.

In May 1897, George Jr. headed out with his wagon show. Newspaper reports indicated that his show was a small affair, but had some great attractions.

For a few weeks in the early summer, Col. Hall returned to

**Hall & MacFlinn,**  
**2 RING CIRCUS**  
 \* \* \* **WORLD'S FAIR** \* \* \*  
**Horse Show**  
 Performers of all Nations in Daring Acts, and  
 The World's Greatest  
 Equine and Canine  
**CARNIVAL.**  
 100 Shetland Ponies,  
 50 Trained Dogs,  
 Bears, Monkeys, Etc.  
 .....GRAND.....  
**Balloon Ascension**  
 AND PARACHUTE LEAP.  
**POPULAR : PRICES,**  
 15 & 25 Cents.  
**De Pere, FRIDAY, JUNE 19.**  
 AFTERNOON AND EVENING.  
 Watch for Our Grand Street Parade!  
 1896

Evansville and purchased "curiosities" for his show. When a farmer in the area offered him a three-headed calf, Hall purchased the animal to display as one of nature's freaks.

Col. Hall returned to his show in the South, and again crossed into Mexico, this time by way of El Paso, into Juarez. The show was combined with the Orrin Brothers Circus and traveled for six weeks to Mexico City, Tampico and other cities.

A Hall & McFlinn newspaper ad used in 1896. Circus World Museum collection.

In the spring of 1898, Almeron Eager received a letter from George Sr. which he shared with the community through the weekly *Enterprise*. It stated that Hall was doing very well with his shows and had earned nearly \$17,000 in just four weeks.

After Col. Hall grew tired of the railroad show, he returned to Evansville in September 1898 after two years of travel in the South. A large crowd gathered to greet the company. Excitement and curiosity prevailed as the circus train was unloaded at the depot. It was like a circus parade, as the animals were taken through the city streets back to the Hall farm at the south edge of Evansville.

George W. Hall once again announced his retirement. "Col. Hall has come home to stay and will discontinue the show business on account of his crippled condition and failing health," the *Evansville Tribune* reported.

Hall promised he would give a benefit performance for the poor of Evansville before he gave up the show business. The benefit show was sponsored by the Women's Relief Corps and brought in \$38.00 for the benefit of the needy.

In his retirement, Col. Hall decided to devote his time to farming. The farm was surrounded by twenty acres of tobacco land. Since some of it was in the marsh, he decided to experiment with tiling. He was one of the first farmers to install tiling to open the wetlands for cultivation. The tiles were promoted as a way to drain the marsh areas and dry out the land.

Despite his interest in farming, Hall could not give up the circus life and he continued to purchase exotic animals. In January 1899, a baby puma and its mother arrived. Col. Hall called the animals South American lions and claimed that they were very docile and tame.

Hall Sr. also continued his generous donations to the people of Evansville. In 1899, when Evansville began to plan for a public library, he was the first person to offer a sizeable donation. The *Badger* newspaper reported his gift: "Many thanks Colonel. We hope to see the day

A Hall & McFlinn advertising wagon. Circus World Museum collection.





when your gift will have a fire proof room over its head."

When The Congregational Junior Society asked him to provide an exhibit for a fund raiser he kindly offered his animals for showing. An exhibit was set up in a local bicycle shop and the proceeds went to the young people.

In addition to his farming, real estate interests in Wisconsin and Florida, and his benevolent activities, Col. Hall was still in the business buying and selling circus animals. In April 1899, he sold the elephant Palm that he had raised from a baby. The elephant went to the Gollmar Brothers Shows in Baraboo. They also purchased some rare tropical birds and cages from him.

A few days later, Hall sold more than 20 head of carriage and work horses. More of his animals and railroad cars were sold in August 1899 to the Canton Carnival Company of Durand, Illinois.

While it appeared that Hall was disposing of his circus, he was keeping animals to be trained by his wife and daughter Mable. Mable specialized in training circus horses and elephants.

Mable trained horses for the chariot races that were a popular feature at circuses. She also had a beautiful white horse named King that she trained to do the cake walk and other fancy dance steps. King was said to be such a graceful dancer that he would "put some with human abilities to shame."

After her father went into temporary retirement, Mable began to travel with other circuses. In the summer of 1899, Mable took her thoroughbred horses to work with another show. She had been hired to participate in the chariot races. "Miss Mable is an expert driver and rider," the *Badger* reporter noted.

Col. Hall and his performers were also asked to appear at the first Rock County Fair in September 1899. Hall's fair exhibit included a strong man, named Prof. Thompson, a double headed cow with three eyes and three horns and the Mexican

"curiosities" Hall had exhibited at his circus museums.

The fair attractions also featured many of Hall's performers. The Holloway boys and George Blunt, all contortionists, "gave a very fine exhibition of their skill every afternoon," a reporter commented. One of the

performance the leopards played chimes while Miss Valencita accompanied them on the piano. Another circus owner who saw the act offered Hall \$3,500 for the leopards, but was refused.

Hall continued to breed and purchase animals for shows. In December 1900, Flora, one of his lions, had four babies and refused to allow anyone near them except Hall's wife Louisa.

The next month, he purchased another trained elephant and taught his daughter Mable to show the animal. Mable was reported to be the first woman to handle an elephant and the only woman to ever handle a male elephant.

Although the circus animals that Hall housed on his land were unusual and captivated the interest of the Evansville people, no animal or event fired the imaginations of young and old like the escape of the Hall circus leopard in September 1901.

All four Evansville newspapers ran lengthy reports of the escape and capture of the leopard. Hall had just finished a successful showing at the Evansville Fair Grounds for the 1901 Rock County Fair. On the Sunday following the fair, he was loading his animals at the depot to take them to Milwaukee for the State Fair. Suddenly, the leopard escaped from its cage.

Rumors of the animal's whereabouts began immediately. A Mrs. Monshau thought she saw the animal jump over a fence into the Lovejoy Lumber Yard, near the depot. Eugene Blakely saw it Sunday evening crossing South Madison Street. Richard Foley was quite sure he saw the animal near the high school, several blocks from the depot. Dr. Colony saw a large animal cross the street in front of his team on the hill in the northwest corner of Evansville. His team refused to move until the animal disappeared. Travelers on the roads near Evansville reported they had seen it along the roadside. The leopard was said to have devoured three head of cattle and seven sheep belonging to Arthur Franklin.



A 1910 Hall Jr. letterhead. Circus World Museum collection.

performers, Claude Holloway, eventually opened his own circus.

When the fair season ended, Col. Hall placed part of his show in the winter headquarters in Evansville. A small show of the animals and performers went to Madison to appear in a carnival. When the carnival opened, the local papers claimed that Hall had the "best, cleanest and most respectable show there."

The carnival in Madison during October 1899 included Hall's son-in-law, Frank McCart and his wife Jessie Hall McCart. Jessie handled snakes, one 24 feet long. In another act the lion trainer went into "their dens and handled them as freely as he would kittens." There were also juggling, a Punch and Judy show, and wire walking.

Col. Hall never lost his interest in developing animal acts and in November, 1899 he hired Millie Cardona, who worked under the name Miss Valencita. Cardona had trained animals for other circuses and Hall hired her to train his leopards.

When Cardona finished with the training, Hall's leopards could perform several tricks including the rolling globe, the see-saw and the electric wheel. The leopards could also form pyramids. At the end of the



Immediately, Hall offered a \$100 reward if the leopard was captured dead and \$250 if it was alive. The township of Union offered a \$25 bounty, the township of Magnolia \$25, the city of Evansville \$25, and George Pullen \$35. Pullen's offer included the stipulation that he was to receive the leopard's hide if it was killed.

On Tuesday following the escape, armed hunters with deer hounds went out to search for the animal but they came back empty handed, "with nothing but weary bones to repay them for their long jaunt." Parents kept children inside their houses.

Just as some were beginning to doubt that the animal was still alive, a report came into the Evansville police department that a Mr. Hess, living on a farm near Lee's creamery in Magnolia township, had found two sheep killed by a wild animal. The leopard was the chief suspect.

The *Badger* reported that nearly thirty hunters hired rigs to take them to the Hess farm. "The animal was located by an old well in the woods and the men began to form in double file ready to fire when the leopard again appeared in sight. Fire was opened upon Mr. Leopard; he sprang upon Mr. Hess and mangled his shoulder terribly. From him it sprang to W. D. Tullar and bit him four times on the arm nearly to the bone, but while Mr. Tullar was being thus attacked he did not fail to give his opponent a bullet in the jaw."

After Tuller shot the animal and it dropped away from him, the other hunters opened fire. When the leopard was finally dead, no one could claim credit for firing the fatal shot.

Doctors were called to help Hess and Tullar. The other hunters returned in wagons and carriages carrying their trophy strapped to the top of one of the rigs. The leopard was hung from a post near Dr. Evans' Pioneer Drug Store at the corner of Main and Madison Streets. Crowds gathered to see the eight-year-old leopard.

At the end of the day, George Pullen got the carcass of the animal.



The front cover of a 1902 Hall courier. Circus World Museum collection.

Pullen had it tanned and made into a rug. Tullar was taken to a hospital in Chicago and Col. Hall paid his medical expenses. Hess survived, but to his surprise, his obituary appeared in several daily papers.

In December 1901, Hess filed a lawsuit against Col. Hall for personal damages. However, Hall and Hess settled for an undisclosed amount of money before the case came to court.

In February 1902, a "Leopard meeting" was called at the city hall. All of those who had helped to kill the leopard came for the distribution of the reward money. Each man received \$4.25.

The excitement did not dampen Col. Hall's enthusiasm for the circus. In April 1902, he sold about \$7,000 worth of animals and received another shipment of animals worth about \$10,000. One was the elephant Columbus that he purchased from the Ringling Bros. Circus. It was reported to be one of the largest elephants in existence, standing 12 feet high and weighing seven tons.

Hall took some of his show wagons to Baraboo where McPhearson and Smith painted the wagons. Daughter Jessie McCart joined the Gollmar Bros show that season.

George Hall, Jr. started the season

of 1902 with a performance in the nearby village of Oregon. George Sr. also stayed close to home and showed his circus at nearby towns, including a 4th of July celebration in Albany.

In early August 1902, Col. Hall opened his circus in Evansville, the first time it had appeared there in six years. A balloon ascension and the "monster elephant" Columbus were the main attractions. There were also singing donkeys.

While the circus was in progress, Columbus decided to leave the show grounds. The elephant pulled loose from his stake and walked out of the tent. He traveled the length of the city several times, knocking over board fences, chicken coops and other small buildings before he returned to the farm at the end of South First Street.

The *Evansville Review* reported that the elephant was a danger to the community and that previous owners had gotten rid of him because "he had been the cause of bringing to a sudden end several lives of persons who had him in charge."

The final show in Evansville in 1902 was the last of Col. Hall's circus performances. His last circus moved on between six and eight railroad cars, gave a one-ring performance, carried about six cages, one or two elephants, and three or so camels. In the fall of 1902 he sold some of his animals to the Sells and Downs Circus. He evidently didn't quite give up the idea of taking his own show out again until 1910 when he ran an ad in *Billboard* offering an eight-car circus, equipment and a sizable menagerie for sale.

While he seldom went on the road himself, Hall Sr. continued to keep enough animals to form his own circus. "It's a fascinating game, this running your own show, whether it be a railroad or wagon show or a museum," he once told a reporter.

His daughter Jessie and her husband Frank traveled with the Gollmar Brothers Shows in 1903. The McCarts had two children, Fred



and Vivian. As a child, Fred also performed with the circus on the trapeze and with snakes, learning acts from both his parents. In the summer the McCart children traveled with Jessie, and in the winter returned to Evansville to attend school.

In the winter months of 1904, Jessie and her nephew Frank Hall were booked into Chicago theaters for vaudeville acts. Jessie performed as a snake charmer and Frank showed his trained dogs.

From 1904 to 1907, Mary Louise "Lou" Hall, and her daughter Mable traveled with the Hargreaves Shows, a circus located in the East. While traveling with the shows, Mable met and married Frank Longbotham.

Lou exhibited a cage of leopards and jaguars for the Hargreaves Shows and Mable performed with her horse King. Mable also handled the elephant, Columbus, the biggest elephant in the world, according to the advertising.

The leopards, horses and elephant were transported to and from Evansville by railroad. While performing with the leopards in the Hargreaves show in the summer of 1904, Lou was bitten by one of her big cats, but the injury was minor and she continued to perform with the animals.

In 1905 Jessie Hall McCart traveled with the Forepaugh-Sells shows. This circus operated out of Columbus, Ohio and was owned by James A. Bailey and the Ringling brothers.

That same year, George Hall, Jr. prepared his circus to travel by wagon. A professional trainer, a man named Costello, was hired to train ponies for George Jr.'s circus.

Winter and early spring months were spent in the repair and maintenance of the circus equipment and training of animals. In late April or early May, the George Hall, Jr. circus was once again on the road. "George W. Hall, Jr. is fitting out in fine shape a show composed largely of trained animals which is to leave this city May 6th," the *Badger* reported in 1905.

George, Jr. sent his advance wagons ahead of the circus to display posters in the towns where he expected to exhibit his shows. Following the trail of the advance wagons, the circus started out the first of May. However, the weather was so rainy that spring that the circus wagons returned to Evansville in late May to await better weather.

"George Hall's circus wagons took many tumbles during the trip from Footville to Durand, Illinois, recently. No great damage sustained but a poor beginning for the circus year," the *Evansville Review* reported. The weather cleared and by July 4th George Jr. reorganized and took his circus to Albany. Evansville children were disappointed that he had not chosen to stay at home and exhibit his animals.

While his children and wife were traveling, Col. Hall remained at home, working his farmland. In the summer of 1905, the elderly circus owner was kicked by one of his horses and the force of the blow broke one of his legs. When he was able to be out of the house again, the *Evansville Review* noted: "It takes something heavier than the kick of a horse to keep him confined at home very long."

In January 1906, Jessie Hall McCart, whose shaky marriage to Frank McCart had dissolved into divorce, married Walter S. Gollmar of the Baraboo circus family. McCart died in 1912.

The *Badger* carried the wedding

announcement. The marriage took place at Col. Hall's home. "The bride has made this city her home since childhood and has a host of friends who wish her happiness and prosperity." The newlyweds planned to make their home in Baraboo.

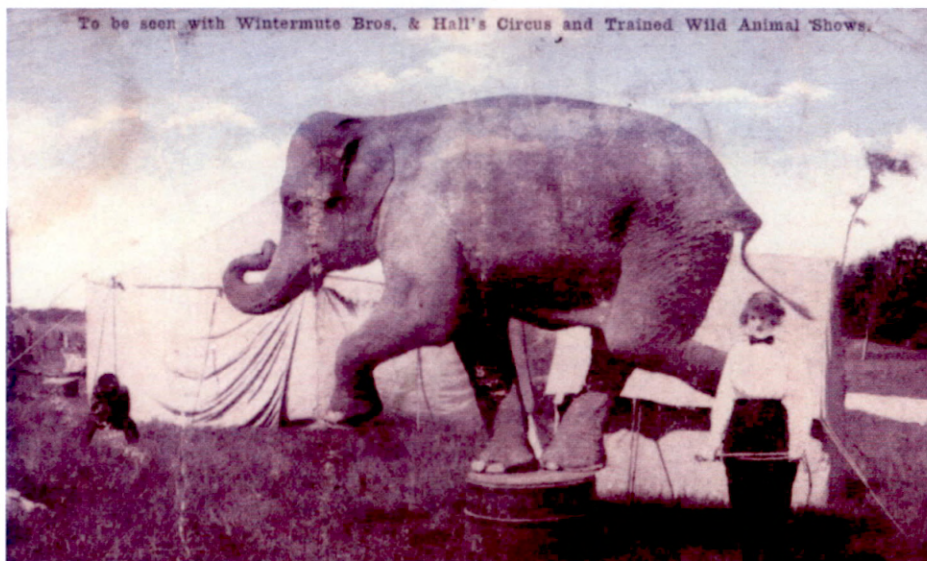
Weather and fire plagued Hall Sr. in 1908. In January, he came close to losing his circus property when a tobacco shed on the farm caught fire from an overheated stove in the stripping room adjoining the shed. Old circus wagons and other circus goods were stored in the wood frame building, along with farming implements.

It was feared that the fire would spread to the animal houses. However, the Evansville firemen responded and managed to confine the fire to the shed, saving most of the circus equipment and all of the animals.

Col. Hall lost a small house and a tobacco shed. The buildings were blown down when a tornado went through his property in late June 1908.

As though he had not suffered enough, Hall had to contend with another leopard escape that was more talk than truth. In December 1908, one of Hall's leopards briefly escaped from its cage. The leopard episode from 1901 was fresh in the minds of many of the townspeople. A

Mable Hall with an elephant on Wintermute & Hall in 1912. Author's collection.





rumor quickly spread that the leopard had escaped into the countryside. "Considerable excitement resulted and timid people kept well within doors," the *Evansville Enterprise* reported. The rumors were false and the leopard never got outside the barn. Its escape was short-lived and harmless.

His adventures made Col. George W. Hall an exciting personality for newspaper reporters to interview. Though he was not running his own show, Hall enjoyed talking to newspaper reporters about his life under the big top. He bemoaned the fact that the old days of the circus were gone.



George Hall Jr. wagon show in 1911. Pfening Archives.

"When it comes to circuses now days they aren't in it with the good old days when we used to travel from stand to stand by wagon, when a menagerie and a January act (a clown act that featured a kicking mule) were the drawing cards," Col. Hall told a *Janesville Gazette* reporter in 1908. He went on to say, "The shows now days go in for a big feature act; something that is dare-devil and not for good old natural exhibits such as the white elephants, the dwarfs, the giants and the four legged girl, or two headed boy, or the Siamese twins.

"Guess my trooping days are over though, I don't have the same feeling about shows that I used to. Why, every spring it just seemed as if I must get on the road. Even when I had gone up from a wagon show to a railroad one, it was just the same."

Hall told the reporter that he had enough animals on his farm to start up a good sized show.

They included four lions, two leopards, one jaguar, one mountain lion, two bears, two badgers, one dromedary, one sacred cow, two performing horses, one trick mule for ring work and old Charley, nee Columbus, the biggest elephant in the world.

Hall's daughter Mable was still in charge of showing the large elephant. "Say, you ought to see my daughter, Mable, make him stand round though," Hall said. "She is a daisy with him and no mistake."

He also described his son George Jr.'s circus in the 1908 interview. George Jr. was traveling with twenty Norman Clydesdales. The show had an elephant, lions, ponies, performing dogs, monkeys, gymnasts and acrobats. It was called the George Hall Circus.

Hall told the reporter that the new wild west shows were just a repeat of the old Buffalo Bill shows, and could not compare with a real old-

time circus. However, two years later, Hall had joined forces with a man called "Tiger Bill" and organized a show that offered many features of both the circus and the wild west show.

Evansville was the site of the first show of the new enterprise. A grand street parade opened the festivities, advertising the outfit's features in the spring of 1910. Col. Hall and Tiger Bill challenged local farmers to bring in a horse that "can't be ridden" and Tiger Bill would not only ride the animal, but also give the family a free ticket to the show. Col. Hall continued an offer he had been making

A Wintermute & Hall show lot in 1913. Author's collection.



for many years and invited orphan children and veterans of the Civil War to view his show free of charge.

Just as the show was about to go on the road, Charley the elephant became too difficult to handle and Hall decided to dispose of him. The *Evansville Enterprise* reported that "there didn't seem to be sufficient strychnine in town to accomplish that result." Col. Hall told the *Evansville Review* that the elephant become deranged "due to the effects of Haley's Comet."

In April 1913, Hall described the demise of the Old Charley to a *Chicago Sunday Tribune* reporter. "I bought him from the Ringlings after he almost killed one of his keepers. He worked for me for four or five years. I gave him a big dose of morphine and killed him. He was worth about \$3,500. He is buried in winter quarters in Evansville."

The elephant was replaced with another one and the Hall-Tiger Bill show went on the road. Tiger Bill set up the wild west show in Chicago in June 1910. Later that same year, Col. Hall briefly went with Tiger Bill in a railroad car show that traveled to the South.

In August, Hall and Tiger Bill headed to New Orleans and planned to visit other southern cities, intending to spend the winter. By November, they had returned with their eight 60-foot railroad cars packed with animals and other circus paraphernalia and unloaded on Main Street near the depot.

During the summer of 1911, Walter Gollmar traveled with the Gollmar Bros. Circus and Jessie Hall Gollmar did occasional shows with circuses in the area. In June, she made a brief appearance with the Hagenbeck-Wallace Shows and the United Show Company in Chicago.

George Hall, Jr.'s children, Frank, Grace, and Charles Russell, had



grown up in the circus and Frank and Grace also married into circus families. In November 1911, Grace Hall married Howard Bruce at her parent's home with her brother Frank E. Hall and his soon-to-be bride, Zella Wintermute, as attendants.

Howard Bruce had been in the show business since he was fourteen years old. An accomplished drummer in circus bands, Bruce and Grace would also operate a circus. The Bruces lived for a short time in Stevens Point, and in October 1912 moved to Evansville.

In March 1912, Frank and Zella were married in Rockford, Illinois. Zella was also from a circus family.



Her father and two of his brothers had operated a wagon show for years. Frank and Zella joined the Wintermute Bros. Circus. As Conover notes: "This connubial merger resulted in another merger of titles. So it became the Hall & Wintermute Circus until it ceased operating in 1917."

The circus season of 1912 found the Hall family once again scattered around the United States operating and working in circuses. Walter Gollmar returned to Baraboo in May for the grand opening of his family's circus. George W. Hall & Son Trained Animal Shows, operated by George, Jr., headed east and north for the circus season.

"Pop" Hall's daughter Mable went to Iowa to join the Yankee Robinson

show, exhibiting her trained horses. Mable had divorced Longbotham and had remarried a circus performer named William Campbell. The Campbells traveled for several years with the Jones Circus.

When the summer season was finished vaudeville shows provided employment to circus performers. In 1913, Evansville's Crystal Theater in the Eager Building at 11 West Main Street offered movies and vaudeville acts.

While Col. Hall claimed to be leading a farmer's life, it was anything but the routine of others working in agriculture. In February 1913, his troupe of educated bears performed on the stage of the Crystal Theater.

The Hall bandwagon in parade around 1900. Pfening Archives.

After their Evansville performance, the bears and their trainer, Louis De Balestrie from Mexico City, were scheduled to perform in Chicago theaters.

The bear trainer also worked with Col. Hall's lions, leopards and jaguars. The following November, an *Evansville Review* news item noted that Hall's trained leopards were being shown in Europe, Australia and Africa by their trainer.

By 1915, Col. Hall had a new plan for a show. He joined with his daughter Mable and her husband William Campbell to form The New Orleans Minstrels. Hall gave a lengthy interview about the show to the

*Evansville Review* in November 1915. Although he was nearly eighty years old, George Hall, Sr. had decided that he would be the active head of the show. The veteran showman believed that the country was on the eve of great prosperity and was ready for a new show.

The Campbells and Hall purchased two railroad cars with Pullman staterooms "luxuriously equipped" for \$12,000. The combination stateroom and baggage cars had all of the conveniences of a hotel. The troupe would travel in luxury with their trained horses, lions, and a band. The railroad cars were purchased in Chicago and brought to Evansville in March 1916.

When the show opened in Evansville in April 1916, the name of the show had been changed to Campbell's New Orleans Minstrel Show. Mable rode her two fancy horses, Rob Roy and the Colonel. Col. Hall led the circus parade.

In the next two years, Evansville lost two of its circus people. In February 1917, Lida Ward Hall, wife of George Jr., died. Funeral services were held at the Baptist Church and she was buried at Maple Hill.

On May 20, 1918, death came very suddenly to the veteran showman, George W. Hall. In honor of Col. Hall, Mayor Elmer H. Libby issued a proclamation asking all business places in Evansville to close during the hour of his funeral. The longest obituary that had ever appeared in Evansville newspapers for a local person celebrated the life of the man they called "America's Oldest Showman."

"In the passing of Mr. Hall there goes one of the most prominent characters that this country and the show business have ever known, and who was a pathfinder and an originator of new and novel features and methods that younger showmen who followed after were glad to imitate." The *Evansville Review* went on to say that "his children have followed the profession, some of them gaining distinction in different lines of show work and being a credit to their father's teaching."

"Mr. Hall admired publicity, but his acts of kindness were always done quietly and without display,



and where one kind act has become known to the world there are many that were not known of except to the beneficiaries.

"In the passing of 'Pop' Hall, Evansville loses a big-hearted, open-minded citizen, who has established himself permanently in the hearts of many of those he has befriended and who has made our little city noted in many states as the abiding place and the home of 'The Greatest Living Showman'."

Hall circuses continued to head quarter in Evansville despite the loss of their founder. In 1919 several news articles noted that two circuses went out under the Hall name. Frank and Zella Hall, who had been living in Whitewater, arrived in late April to begin their work with the Col. George W. Hall Shows, operated by George Jr. They opened the season in Evansville on May 3 with two performances.

Mable Campbell and her husband William operated the Hall Shows. Her mother, Mary Louise Hall, traveled with them. In February 1919, Mable traveled to California to purchase an elephant. In April, a camel and a llama had also been purchased for their show. The Pullman cars that had been used for the 1916 show had been rebuilt with a new electrical lighting system. There was also a kitchen and restaurant counter for the circus employees.

Walter Gollmar purchased a home on South Madison Street in March 1919. He went into retirement after the Gollmar Bros. Circus was sold in 1916.

In July 1923, Mary Louise Hall died in Murphy Tennessee, while traveling with her daughter Mable. She was brought home to Evansville where her funeral was held at St. Paul's Catholic Church. She was laid to rest beside her husband, Col. George W. Hall, Sr.

For the next several years, the Halls and their spouses operated shows under several different names, sometimes in combination with other shows operated by family

members. In 1920, Frank and Zella Hall started the Vanderburg Bros. Circus in Whitewater.

In 1924, Russell Hall began his circus and started from his father's farm with ten different animal acts. Because it was Russell's first time on the road alone, his father, George Jr., intended to go with him. The show included sheep, monkeys, bears, mules, ponies, and geese.

Frank Hall and Howard Bruce combined their shows into a ten truck show out of Whitewater. They also had trained sheep and goats, doing some acts that had "never been seen by the show-going public."

The headlines of the May 10, 1928 *Evansville Review* announced that Evansville was still a show town after 50 years. Russell Hall traveled with a truck show. That year, Russell had shows scheduled in Iowa, Minnesota and Canada.



A Hall cage in parade around 1900. Pfening Archives.

Howard Bruce and Grace Hall Bruce operated their own show, starting with performances in Utica and Rockdale in 1928. The Bruces' named their circus the H. A. Bruce Shows.

George Hall, Jr. had retired from the circus business. He was still living on his farm north of Evansville and driving a horse-drawn carriage. In early June 1929, a car driven by Harold Teasdale of Madison tried to pass a buggy driven by George on North Madison Street. The buggy was smashed and George got caught in the harness and was dragged

along the cement pavement on North Madison Street for a "considerable distance." He was taken to Madison General Hospital in Madison. He was badly bruised and had internal injuries, including several broken ribs. Daughter Grace Bruce and son Russell were called home from their shows because of his critical condition.

Although he lived for another year, George never fully recovered from his injuries. He went to live his son Frank in Whitewater and died there on December 2, 1930. The funeral was held at the Allen Funeral Home in Evansville and he was buried at Maple Hill.

George, Jr.'s son Frank died in August 1936 and his wife Zella, continued to operate their show for a few years.

Grace and Howard Bruce and their son Mark gave up the show business in 1935 to start the Badger Trailer Company, making a travel-trailer in a factory located on North Madison Street. The Bruces wintered in Key West, Florida. Howard Bruce died in March 1969 and Grace Bruce died in November 1963, and Howard in March 1969.

Mark Bruce was the fourth generation of the Evansville Halls to work in circuses. He traveled with his parents as a child and later learned many staging and show routines working circuses in Florida. He used his talents in directing and making sets for the Evansville Little Theatre.

Russell Hall continued to run his shows out of Evansville using his father's farm north of Evansville as the winter headquarters of his show until the late 1940s. He retired to South Beloit and died in January 1956.

Jessie Gollmar, George Sr.'s daughter, lived to be eighty seven years old. A *Milwaukee Journal* reporter interviewed Jessie in 1940. Though she had been out of the circus business for several years, she never lost her interest in it. She continued to take the *Billboard*, the circus trade paper. Jessie told the reporter she still visit-



ed any circus that came within a hundred mile radius of Evansville.

Walter Gollmar, Jr. is the last surviving member of the Hall circus family living in Evansville. He also performed with a circus band in the 1930s, but returned home to live with his mother, following the death of his father, Walter S. Gollmar, Sr., in 1933.

Four generations of Halls joined the circus, beginning with the young George W. Sr. who ran away from home and found work he loved for the rest of his life. As a *Milwaukee Journal* reporter noted in 1940: "Things are pretty quiet down here in Evansville these days. An elephant never strolls placidly through the back yard and the citizenry never goes busting out on a leopard hunt."

#### HALL'S 1913 INTERVIEW

*This interview by C. D. Donald with George Washington Hall was originally published in the Chicago Daily Tribune on April 13, 1913.*

Back in '47 he became known as "Popcorn George." As time wore on and he qualified as a full-fledged circus man he earned the sobriquet of "Colonel," the highest appellation of respect the younger generation of white top operatives can bestow upon a fellow whom they love and revere. With the free and easy abandon of the sawdust ring, some of them address him as "Pop." Not one in ten now knows his full name.

When he first ran away from his Massachusetts home and became a circus follower he took with him the good old Yankee name of George Washington Hall. He then was about 10 years old. His one crowning ambition in those youthful days was to become distinguished as the owner of his own circus. So he began his circus career where so many others since have started--as a candy "butcher." He "barked" inside and outside the tent. His "spiel" was termed classic by all who had the good fortune to hear it. It brought him money--enough money, in fact, after sticking to it for several sea-



A Hall cage in parade around 1900. Pfening Archives.

sons, to become an independent candy stand owner.

Every summer he joined out; every fall he went back home. Every year his circus education developed. For the first thirteen years of his circus life "Popcorn George" didn't venture east of Buffalo, for Buffalo was "way out west in them days." Railroads to Chicago were an unknown quantity; the Goulds and the Vanderbilts had not yet begun to realize the immense possibilities of the fabled Mississippi valley and the vast reaches of undeveloped country slumbering in the lap of the Rockies.

#### Greeley Advertised Him.

Once, to vary the routine, Popcorn George became a train butcher in the eastern country. That was fifty-seven years ago. A little town called Barton was making wonderful preparations for celebrating its one hundredth anniversary. Pop saw a chance to make "a piece of change," and he went after it. Popcorn, though quite a popular delicacy in the west, had not yet been introduced to the proud and effete east. Popcorn George "barked" popcorn on the streets during the fete.

Horace Greeley delivered a speech at Barton on the opening day of the celebration. He noticed George peddling popcorn. Greeley never overlooked enterprise. A few days later in the New York Tribune an editorial stated that George by bringing popcorn to the tables of easterners had hit upon an innovation that was bound to be lucrative. It was, too. Popcorn George made money hand

over fist.

He is the oldest living showman in America today and last week became a charter member of the Showmen's League of America. It was he who invented the popcorn brick and the popcorn ball. It was he who inaugurated the 10 cent circus, and he was the first man to make money at these low rates. For Popcorn George made money when other circus men were forced to disband for want of patronage.

His career of over sixty years as a showman has been filled with romance and, adventure. It is not my purpose to attempt to chronicle it in my own way. I would ruin it. Nobody but Popcorn George himself could narrate it in all its picturesque glory. So, in the vernacular of the day, "let George do it."

#### Sold Father's Verses.

I'm going on 76 years old. I am twenty days older than Admiral George Dewey, and J. Pierpont Morgan, who died in Rome other day, was five months older than me. We were all born in the same year and all good Yankees.

There are four generations of us living. My son is a grandfather and I'm a great grandfather. I was born on the 5th day of December, 1837, in Lowell, Mass. The folks moved to Manchester, N. H., when I was 7, and when I was 10 they went to Lowell.

The first thing I sold in my life was some verses that my father had written on the Parker murder. I was about 8 then, I reckon. Parker was a tax collector in Manchester, and he was riding through the woods one night with a money belt around his waist when he was waylaid by a gang of men who cut his throat. Father was one of the party that found him in the woods the following day. He wrote some poetry on the affair, had 'em printed, and I went out and peddled 'em. I sold quite a bunch of 'em, too.

The four Wentworth brothers were tried for the murder of Parker. Their attorney was Frank Pierce, who became the twenty-first president of the United States in 1852. Pierce



took the case when it looked as though nobody on earth could save the Wentworths. They were acquitted.

#### Circus Claims All the Family.

My schooling was sadly neglected. I was so crazy to run off with a show that I never had half a common school education. The last time I went to school was one winter when I was 10 years old. Before that I had gone only once in a while, according to how I felt. My folks couldn't make me go to school. I was considered a mighty bad boy, a boy that would learn nothing. I had but one object in life, and that was to make enough to take care of me in my old days. I know I'd be perfectly satisfied to live quietly in my own home.

I have two daughters and one son. George runs a show and his son runs a show. It's in the blood. My girl Mabel works a big elephant act, and also a couple of menage horses right now. A menage act is where a woman dresses up fashionably and does fancy horseback riding. Mabel's married and her husband is with a circus.

The first thirteen years of my circus life were spent with the Howe & Cushing, Jim Meyers, Joe Pendleton [Pentland], Float [Sloat] & Shephard, Dan Rice and Dick Sands shows. I traveled with these shows after having run away from home at the age of 10 with 87 cents in my pocket. Some years I had the stand privileges and at other times I was a talker for the side shows. John Allen, Soapy Jones and Frank Nash taught me how to talk for a side show.

#### Popcorn as a Dessert.

For five years, when the shows went into winter quarters in the fall, I made my home in New York until the circus went out the following spring. I couldn't sit around idle in New York, so I worked the popcorn business. I supplied the old Astor house, French's and Lovejoy's in New York with half a bushel of popcorn each and every day. They served it in the dining room as dessert, for popcorn was a delicacy in the east in those days.

A bushel of popcorn cost me about \$1.25, and from this bushel I got a

little over eight bushels when it was popped. I sold this for 4 cents a quart--there were lots of pennies in New York then--and in Chicago, when I sold popcorn there, I got 5 cents a quart for it. Wherever I sold it, I kept fourteen boys, women and children working fairs and theaters. It was during these winter months that I invented the popcorn brick and the popcorn ball.

Fifty-two years ago I left New York on the 18th day of April and worked with the Dick Sands show. We went up into Canada, across into Michigan, down into Indiana, and closed in Chicago. In Chicago we showed on a vacant lot right opposite the courthouse, where the old Corn Exchange now stands.

Chicago in those days had nothing but board sidewalks. You'd walk along a little bit and then go up a step or two, and then a little distance further on you came to another step or two. These light flights of stairs were scattered all over the town.

The high cost of living didn't worry us then. Right in Chicago a man could buy all the eggs he wanted at 4 cents a dozen and butter--the best made--at 7 cents a pound. This was fifty-two years ago. Up around Evansville, Wis. where all my farmland is, they have, on account of the high price of land, dug a lot of ditch-

George Washington Hall. Pfening Archives.



es. One ditch, going into Janesville, is seventeen miles long. All the wet lands have been reclaimed and they now are the best hay lands in the world.

#### Too Wet for His Circus.

Next season Sands took out a wagon show. I joined, and we went through Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Illinois. Following that I went out with Jerry Mabie from Delavan, Wis. That was fifty years ago, during the war. A year later I was with the George F. Bailey and the Van Amberg (sic) shows. That winter I opened a museum in Wisconsin at the capital and ran it for two winters.

In the spring of the first year I started out with my own circus and a small menagerie, I ran into one of the wettest seasons ever turned in. Didn't do enough business to pay for feed, and I dropped a big bunch of money. You see, it cost me about \$10,000 to put this show on, but when I hit the lead mine regions of Wisconsin the rain set in and didn't stop until I closed. The operating expenses amounted to \$250 or \$300 a day, and I stood the pressure no longer than I had to.

It took my side show out of Wisconsin and combined it with Jim French's round top. When we shut down in the fall I was about \$5,000 to the good. I hibernated in Madison that winter. The succeeding spring I was to join out with Dan Costello (sic), who was coming down the river from St. Paul and intended opening at MacGregor, Ia.

About that time old man [Hiram] Orton came along with his wagon show. At the last minute I changed my mind and went with him. We cleaned up a lot of change in Iowa and calculated to go to Denver. The grass was too short, however, to attempt making the trip across the plains, for we prairie schooner those days by trail and we depended on the grass crop to feed our stock. Orton wanted to tackle the job anyway, but I finally persuaded him not to.

#### Armed for Bushwhackers.

"What will we do, then?" Orton asked. Well, we were billed right up



to Omaha at the time. I says, "Go down into Nebraska territory, make a couple of stands, and then come back to Sidney, Ia., and show the first and second counties of Iowa."

"But," he argued, "the boys (meaning the bushwhackers) are out in the prairie."

"Well," I told him, "there are more of us than there are of them, and if they don't surprise us it will be impossible for 'em to get anything from us because we could save our stock with our men."

So we bought up all the butcher knives we could lay our hands on and armed the men with them, and kept ourselves in readiness to meet any attack they made in an effort to run our stock off. We showed all the country back to Memphis, Mo., and had no trouble whatever with the boys. Why, they were just crazy to come to see the show like all other citizens.

There was plenty of stock in the country for them to run off without attacking us. They ran a lot of it out of Kansas over into Missouri. Old Daddy [Sterling] Price had his army in Missouri at that time.

Well, when we came to Memphis we done an awful business, and when we struck Mount Pleasant, Ia., we ran into Bill Lake's paper, and as he had billed a lot stronger than we had, our business was mighty light. Orton got discouraged and closed the show at Mount Pleasant, running his stock over to Davenport, where he put it up at auction. The price didn't suit him, though, so he stopped the sale and leased the show to the man that was running the candy stand, and he kept the show going until fall. I took my show and joined Howe's London, and the rest of the season was a partner with Egbert Howe[s].

Followed Country Fairs a While.

The following year I went with Frank Howe, whose father ran a livery stable in Chicago at that time. He had a circus and I had a performing animal aggregation. Fairly good business for that year.

The next year Abraham Lincoln was shot. I bought the wax statuary of Wilkes Booth and Abe as he lay on the catafalque, and put this exhibit

on to the Frank Howe show. I closed with them at Leavenworth, Kas., the year that Lee surrendered.

Then I opened a museum and performing animal show opposite the Sherman house in Leavenworth and stayed there until the county fairs commenced. I followed the fairs a while, going to Platte City in Missouri and then to Gallatin, and then I went to Adel, Ia., and wintered with old man Orton. I went out with him in the spring, but afterwards joined Sethby-Howe [Seth B. Howes] European show and was a partner



A Hall cage in parade around 1900. Pfening Archives.

with Egbert Howe[s]. Howe[s] was the first man to introduce Aztec children in the United States, and we did a big business that season. The following year found me with the Great Eastern until fall, when we shut down at Selma, Ala., after making a lot of money.

The next season I again joined the Great Eastern, and then I went wild with my own railroad show. It was a round top show, and to draw the crowds I advertised a big free performance before the opening. All I did was send up a balloon every day, but it brought me a lot of business that I might not otherwise have corralled.

Wagon Shows and Candle Light. Shows in the old days were all wagon outfits and [the] expense of operating a circus wasn't more than \$100 to \$150 a day. That included salaries, feed, and everything else. Most of us had five or six performers, a menage

horse, a couple of trick mules, a hundred foot round top. First they were lit by candle light. Later on they lit 'ern with burning fluid, then with kerosene, then gasoline, and finally progressed to the electric lights.

With the wagon show in the summer time we invariably had a 3 o'clock breakfast on short rides, but if the drive to the next town we had billed was twenty-five or thirty miles we started away in the evening as quick as we got through with our performance. All long trips were made by wagon trail. There wasn't a railroad within forty miles of Des Moines. Des Moines then was a stage center.

We made six stands between Des Moines and Omaha. You couldn't find a hotel in any of the places where we stopped. Just a sawmill and a house scattered here and there. Our women folks and children were lodged in a house of some kind over night, but the men had to sleep under the wagons or anywhere else they could find, if they slept at all. We trailed under difficulties in those days, but we were a strong, robust lot of people because of it.

First Concert in Big Tent.

Old man Orton was the originator of putting on a concert at the conclusion of a circus performance in the big tent. This was due to an accident. The wagon carrying the concert paraphernalia broke down and didn't get into town on time. Orton says: "Give the concert in the big tent." That's where it was given, and it proved such a success that it became a permanent institution. Later on this feature was adopted by all the other shows. Orton's first concert in the big tent after the main performance was put on just a few years after the war.

Forepaugh was the first man who saw money in putting a menagerie in front of a circus. In the early days the menageries traveled separately and carried no seats. A short lecture was given on the animals and then the people stood around the ring. The



clown would sing a song, the trick horse would be introduced, and the "January" act followed. The January act is where a trained mule gets to kicking and won't let anybody ride him. That concluded the show.

Dan Rice was the most natural clown that was ever known up to that time. As a pantomimist and singing clown and a man that could turn the sublime into the ridiculous quicker than any other man in circusdom, he had no equal. He kept people laughing all the time he was in the ring. When I was traveling with Rice I rode what was called the comic mule act part of the season, and in return for this heroism I got the privilege of conducting a candy stand on the lot.

#### A Tour of the West Indies.

Rice never was lost for a witty retort. I met him in New Orleans one day--I hadn't seen him for several years--and we came face to face on Congo square, where the black people danced, before the war, the same as they did in Africa. Dan invited me over to a Creole saloon to have a drink. As we went in we met an old confederate officer that Dan knew, and he joined us at the bar. He turned around to Dan and said: "Well, Uncle Dan, you seem to hold your age remarkably well. You're looking finer'n a fiddle, and you ain't grown a day older in twenty years. How do you do it?"

"Colonel," says Dan, "I never did believe in these patent nostrums only of late. I saw this Great Egyptian Invigorator advertised. I bought a bottle of it and have taken a teaspoonful of it three times a day. And it brings back all the old vigor of youth and makes me feel like a 16 year old. Colonel," he says, quicker'n lightning, "you better let me order you a barrel of it."

On Jan. 1, 1885 I chartered the schooner Emma Fox and left Jacksonville for the West Indies, playing a week at Martinique, Barbados, Port of Spain, and Trinidad, six miles from South America. Then we went to San Fernando and showed a week. When I came to get my clearance for St. George at Port of Spain, Gov. Robinson, on the government farm

at Port of Spain, got permission from the old country to present me with a calf born of the sacred cow.

The sacred cow was bom of sacred cattle that the British government had imported from the East Indies to the West Indies for breeding with the native cattle in their possession at Demerara. There they have eighty different breeds of lop-eared cattle, but the sacred cow, which is worshiped by the Hindus, is a cow weighing about 1,400 pounds, the bull weighing 1,700. They have long flabby ears that they have trouble keeping out of their mouths while they are feeding. They are beautiful animals, while mixed with a smattering of black. Well, I kept this calf until she was 18 years old.



Mable Hall and Charlie the elephant. Author's collection.

After I got my clearance I went to Granada [Grenada], one of the West Indian islands. A camel was born on board ship there. We raised this camel and brought it back to the states. From Granada we went to St. Kitts, St. Thomas, Gaudaloupe, and thence to San Juan, Porto Rico. Then to Nassau, right opposite Cuba, returning on May 12 to Brunswick, Ga.

In '86 I started to Mexico. At Galveston we had a big fire that destroyed the greater portion of the town. We moved our show five times that night to different lots in order to escape the flames. We went into Mexico at Nuevo Laredo, thence to Monterey, and just as we struck the town an insurrection broke out. We were besieged there for eight days. The battle was fought from 9 at night

until 2 in the morning. I telegraphed President Diaz for protection, and he sent troops to protect the American property, placing the town under martial law, taking the authority away from the local officers.

After showing in Monterey one day we loaded the show on Mexican cars and went across 400 miles of Mexico, showing all the towns between Zacatecas and the City of Mexico, coming back in the spring via El Paso. While we were in Mexico a number of working people were taken down with smallpox. Because of this I had a great deal of trouble getting through New Mexico and Colorado--so much trouble, in fact, that I closed the show and shipped home to Evansville.

I was quarantined in Houston, Tex., when I was with Sam McFlynn [McFlinn] one season. Smallpox broke out--139 cases of it--and the mayor closed up my show right after I had made a balloon ascension. Fifteen thousand people had bought tickets for my performance, but as the churches, theaters, and all other places of amusement had been closed, I had to shut down, too. I was quarantined all winter, but Sam managed to get back to Davenport.

#### Charity Not Forgotten.

When I was exhibiting my museum in the winter in Memphis a big fire broke out at the corner of Giocia [?] and Main streets. The walls of the building fell into the street, killing two men, wounding eighteen. I played a benefit, giving the entire receipts of the show and what I solicited from the board of trade men--something like \$2,000--to the chief of the fire department for the maintenance of the children made orphans by the fire. I mention this fact because it had a bearing on a later occurrence.

In the '88 election I was indicted by the grand jury for illegal voting and intimidation at the polls in Memphis. I was arrested in Little Rock by United States Marshal Falkenberg and taken back to Memphis to be thrown in jail. I sent for the chief of the fire department. He remembered the benefit performance I had given and went among the cotton merchants and got a \$10,000



bond for me to appear in the United States court. I was cleared, The expense of the trial was \$4,800.

I was the originator of the 10 cent show. Many years ago I worked for old John Nathan[s]. One day I said: "Uncle John, what are you going to do in this country when the show business gets different?" He was an old country showman. "Why," he says, "reduce the price of admission."

#### Low Price a Winner.

That rung in my ears. George De Haven coming out of Cuba had a little bad luck. Business was rotten through Texas. He got to Fort Worth and sent for me to come and bring some money. When I got down there I changed the route and instead of staying in Texas I ran him through Indian territory.

In order to have time to bill the territory properly the show had to lay off a week or so. I advised him to open at Denison, without advertisement, and stay there a few days, exhibiting every night for 10 and 20 cents--just enough to keep up supplies. It proved a big success.

Afterwards I opened a 10 and 20 cent show here in Chicago and it went mighty big. I played here when old Sweeney was the chief of police of the town of Lake. I put the first Sunday show on in Chicago, cleaning up between \$400 and \$500.

Fourteen years ago, when I was exhibiting in Cincinnati, a man named Davis got in a little hard luck and I bought his entire show--cars, seats, horses, canvas, and all rights. There was an elephant with the show named Empress who belonged to the Empire Printing Company of Chicago, and she was turned over to me as custodian.

They brought her in at 3 o'clock. At 9 o'clock, when I was feeding my own elephants, she got jealous, and when I was off my guard she knocked me down with her trunk. I was unconscious and she pressed me into the ground, breaking my hip.

I was taken to the hospital and while I was there I bought the elephant for \$1,000. They sold her to me for that price because I didn't bring suit for personal injury, and in that way we both made money.

#### End of the Savage Empress.

I kept her eighteen months, then sold her to Nickel Plate Harris for \$3,000. Empress killed her keeper in the spring, a fellow named Scotty. Afterwards she killed a colored man at Atlanta, Ga. Then she fixed a stranger in West Virginia, and wound up two years later by killing another keeper, Jimmie the Bum, at Valdosta, Ga. After killing him she got loose and ran into the country about six miles.

The chief of police, who had a gun that was used in the San Diego fight that shot a steel bullet, went out after her. He found her lying down, and when she was getting up he pinged her at a distance of seventy-five yards, the bullet entering under her jaw and lodging in her brain.

I had another elephant, old Charley, that went insane in winter quarters. I bought him from the Ringlings after he almost killed one of his keepers. He worked for me for four or five years. I gave him a big dose of morphine and killed him. He was worth about \$3,500. He is buried in winter quarters at Evansville.

I've made a lot of money in the show business. It took hard work and long years to get it, but I had a lot of fun out of it. Whenever I had a little surplus money I bought farm land in Wisconsin. I'd buy a farm, pay part of the money down, and the next year paid it all up. I kept buying a d j o i n i n g places, but never sold any.

Old Showman  
a Wealthy Farmer.

Property in Wisconsin has been increasing in value right along, and farming seems to be a respectable business out my way now. I've got between 500 and 600 acres in the five different farms I have in Wisconsin. They're in the towns of

Magnolia and Union, all within a short distance of Evansville. We raise about forty acres of tobacco every year, keep seventy cows, do a big dairy business, and grow a lot of corn.

In the last few years I gave considerable attention to breaking elephants, lions, and leopards in groups of five to seven to do big acts. I've closed out nearly all this breaking now, and I'm getting along to an age where I don't want to break any more.

My education is not quite up to figuring out just how much worldly goods I am possessed of. It's a waste of time to compute such statistics. Besides my Wisconsin possessions I've got fourteen tenements in Evansville, \$20,000 worth of property in Tampa, Fla., and half a block of business property in Denver.

I've worked hard for what I have, had a hip broken and have walked lame ever since, had an arm torn pretty near off by leopards on two occasions, had my right hand split wide open by a lion, and have thirty or forty other minor scars on my body. But it's a fascinating game, this running your own show, whether it be a railroad or wagon show or a museum, and when you can save up a good many thousand dollars at it for the inevitable rainy day you're willing to take the wounds and carry the scars.



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# From Frying Pan To Fire: Ruffin Switches To Vargas

By Lane Talburt

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*Author's Note: This is the third in a series on America's first black wild animal trainer, Junior Ruffin. Previous stories described his early circus days, beginning in 1954 as Clyde Beatty's cage boy, through his dual role as performer and tent master on Hoxie Bros. Circus.*

For Manuel "Junior" Ruffin, the contrasts between Hoxie Tucker and Cliff Vargas could not have been more stark.

Leonard "Hoxie" Tucker was steeped in every aspect of the circus business. He could and did perform just about any task that a tented show required. He was a true "high grass" owner. He almost always telegraphed his emotions to those who worked around him—his hat brim turned upward signaled everything was okay; turned down, it spelled trouble.

No one denied Clifford E. Vargas's gifts as a promoter, but he was a relative neophyte when it came to operations. Totally unpredictable in his meteoric temperament, he had a reputation for erupting into "Vargasmis" when even a slight breeze ruffled the big top. His fear of the wind—and especially the potential for a blow down—topped the list of his phobias.

And that's the environment into which Ruffin entered when he joined Vargas in March 1974 in El Paso, Texas. Originally known as the Miller Johnson Circus, Vargas changed the title after Junior joined on the show. He also had purchased a big top, having rented tents since taking over Charlie Germaine's equipment for the three-ringer.

Ostensibly hired to be the big top boss, Ruffin became a spare tire, so to speak, on a not-so-well-oiled machine. As Vargas quickly informed him, the incumbent boss canvas

man, Floyd Baker, had retracted his decision to quit. And there obviously was no room on the performance roster for Junior to show off his skills as wild animal trainer. The show already had two large cat acts—with Harry Thomas opening the first half and Pat Anthony the second. Vargas also featured Col. Wallace "Wally" Ross's elephants and Wally Naughton's bears.

Clifford Vargas. Pfening Archives.



Vargas then dropped another shoe. He told the new hire that he would not be able to pay the promised \$1,000 a week, but that Junior would have a job at \$800. This was still almost \$300 more than Ruffin had earned at Hoxie Bros.

Rather than making an "either/or" decision on who would be big-top boss, Vargas suggested that Ruffin work it out with Baker (an African-American, like Ruffin), who formerly had worked for Ringling big-top boss George Warner and who had also been in charge of the Beatty-Cole canvas. It was a no-brainer, Ruffin laughed. "I said, 'Let Baker be the boss.' And that's what I did," without a pay cut.

The Vargas big top impressed Ruffin, but he was not taken with the efficiency of Baker and his crew. He noted that at the close of the Phoenix, Arizona, stand, the crew loaded a dozen new portable toilets onto a trailer. (Vargas bought the donnikers to avoid the expense of renting them at each location.) Unfortunately, no one had emptied the contents of the movable restrooms before they were placed on top of a pile of wooden seat planks on a flatbed trailer. The grossly stained planks were not discovered until the trailer pulled onto the next lot in California. No amount of bleaching made them useable, Ruffin mused.

The big top—Vargas's pride and joy—had two 265-foot end sections with four 50-foot middles and was supported by four 60-foot center poles. Requiring 285 stakes to hold it in place, the bale-ring top seating 5,000 was the largest since Ringling Bros. folded its canvas city in 1956. Other circuses staged billing wars over which had "the biggest big top." Similar claims were made by D.R.



Miller's Carson and Barnes, and the Acme Circus Corporation's Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros (In addition to the tented dates, Circus Vargas also played outdoors in ballparks.)

Under Baker's watch, Ruffin noted, the big top crew required seven days to erect the tent, including two days for setting up heavy, ballpark seating on steel supports. Teardown took up most of two days. Given the fact that Vargas was making lengthy jumps, the show was losing lots of time—and revenue—between dates.

"Now that was the only show on load-out night where the big top crew went to bed [following the final local performance], because they had a big top crew and a seat crew," he explained.

The tent crew—with Ruffin among them—would be lucky to begin its part of the tear-down by mid-morning the next day. By then, most of the "Sallies," spot labor recruited at local Salvation Army shelters, would have walked off the lot after the arduous seat-removal process.

"We had a regular crew of eight or nine guys, but those guys had dragged butt all night. So the next day what good were they when you were trying to roll canvas?"

Vargas, lacking the operational knowledge, took the delays for granted—until Junior stepped up to the canvas boss's position when Baker left the show in Rochester, New York, in mid-season 1974.

Over the next several months Ruffin instituted major changes in the labor-intensive task. First, he combined the once-separate seat and tent crews into one which would perform all big-top set-up and teardown duties.

Second, he began to hire a dependable canvas crew, including King Charles Weathersby, the Hoxie band-leader and arrow man, and King Charles's sons, who joined on at the end of the 1974 season. King Charles continued as arrow man on Vargas, but did not play in the band.

Third, he implemented a color-coded system for identifying guy ropes to tie down the tent poles, tutoring individual workers on how to tie basic knots.

The new tent master's time-and-money-saving techniques reduced set up from seven days to 11 hours.

And he was able to downsize the tent crew from 60 workers, both full-time and temporary, to a dedicated group of less than two dozen. Teardown was shortened from two days to six hours or less.

Cliff Vargas was so pleased with the rapid improvement that on the second stand under Junior's leadership, in Troy, New York, the owner hired a band and threw a private party exclusively for the tent crew and working men, Ruffin recalled.

Back with Circus Vargas for a second season in 1975, Ruffin and his crew made the usual long jumps—from Miami to Tampa to Houston and then to El Paso before heading to the profitable West Coast engagements. At El Paso winds ripped up the empty big top, forcing the show to sidewall it for the remaining performances. The owner sent Junior ahead to lay out the next lot in Burbank, California. Vargas experienced turn-away business there and at many other sites.

On July 12, a sudden cloud burst at Mt. Clemons, Michigan, caused a blow down just before the start of the morning show. The big top was rendered unusable.

Here, fortune smiled on Vargas in a round-about way. First, circus goers were able to vacate the tent before the storm struck, so there were no injuries. (Johnny Peers, Vargas producing clown at the time, recently recalled that he was still in his trailer on that 1975 morning when he heard the crowd stampeding past his trailer.)

Johnny Peers. Author's photo.



And second, the storm-weary owner had ordered a replacement tent before the incident.

But Ruffin became the apparent fall guy for the blow down. As many ex-Vargas employees later would attest, the circus owner fostered an atmosphere of continual back-biting and back-stabbing, pitting boss against boss, performer against performer, and worker against worker.

Summoned to the office trailer where the nervous Vargas waited with a few of his cronies, Ruffin was told, "Junior, we're going to make some changes around here. We're going to make you superintendent of the show."

The true intent of Ruffin's "promotion" emerged when Vargas announced that, effective immediately, he was elevating John "Dirty Red" Trower, from Ward Hall's side show crew, to big top boss.

In disgust, King Charles Weathersby and some of the big top crew walked off the show. Ruffin stayed as the toplevel circus completed its Mt. Clemons stand as a side walled show.

At the next lot, in Detroit, Leif Osmundson, owner of Leaf Tent and Sail Company, delivered the new canvas—a solid blue bale-ring top replacing the previous orange-and-white-striped version.

Dirty Red's obvious lack of experience in putting up the main top, plus the shortage of veteran crew, threw the tent-raising into chaos and threatened to push back the opening performance in this important market.

Osmundson, frustrated by the disarray, approached Ruffin, who was watching from his mobile home. "He said, 'Junior, I heard the story [about Ruffin being replaced]. You don't have to put up with this from Vargas. You can come back to Sarasota and work for me in my canvas place.'

"And I said, 'Aw, I'll be alright.'

"And Leif said, 'Look, I don't have forever here. Why don't you go out there and put the show up.'"

Ruffin complied. When Vargas returned to the lot from doing advance work across the border in London, Ontario, the new spread of canvas was in the air.

The owner immediately congratulated Junior. "Leif told me what you



did," Ruffin remembers Vargas saying. "I want to thank you. We'll straighten everything out when we get to London."

Following the Detroit date, the circus caravan arrived late in the morning at the new Canadian site. By late afternoon, the canvas crew, still under Dirty Red's supervision, had yet to get the first center pole erected.

Somewhat sheepishly, Vargas strode over to a weather-beaten former concession tent where Junior and John Weathersby (King Charles's son, who had remained behind) were observing the Keystone Cops-style tent raising.

"And he said, 'Junior, I know you've been laughing for the past four hours. Let me ask you a question: If you just walked over there and started where (the spread-out canvas) is right now, could you have those poles up before the sun goes down?'"

"I said, 'Certainly, and I probably will have the tent up, too.'"

"Vargas said, 'Would you go over there and take over right now?' And that's why I went over and took [the job back]."

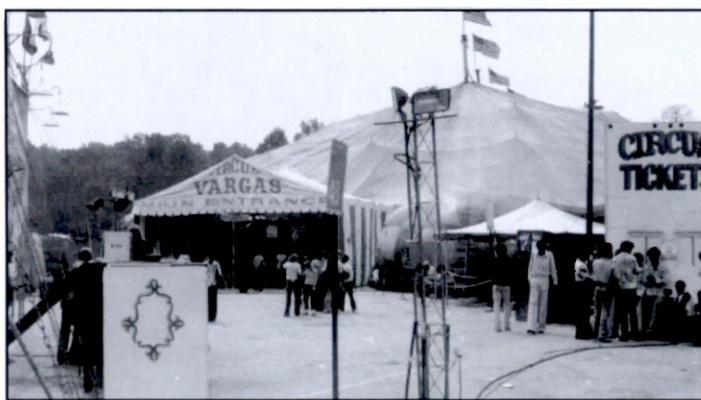
As a result, Vargas was able to open the show earlier than he had anticipated.

By the end of the '75 season, Ruffin had had his fill of Vargas's idiosyncrasies.

"I was just tired of the way that [circus] was running," he said. "I couldn't get any rest. Every time the wind would blow, he would keep calling and wanting me to get up. And you'd have to stay up all night."

After completing the last date in Massachusetts, Ruffin drove his new motor home across the Canadian border into Ontario to the winter quarters of his new employer, Garden Bros. Circus, at Hillsboro. The quarters consisted of Ian Garden's farm house and several nearby buildings.

Ruffin left behind a higher weekly salary of \$1,350 to



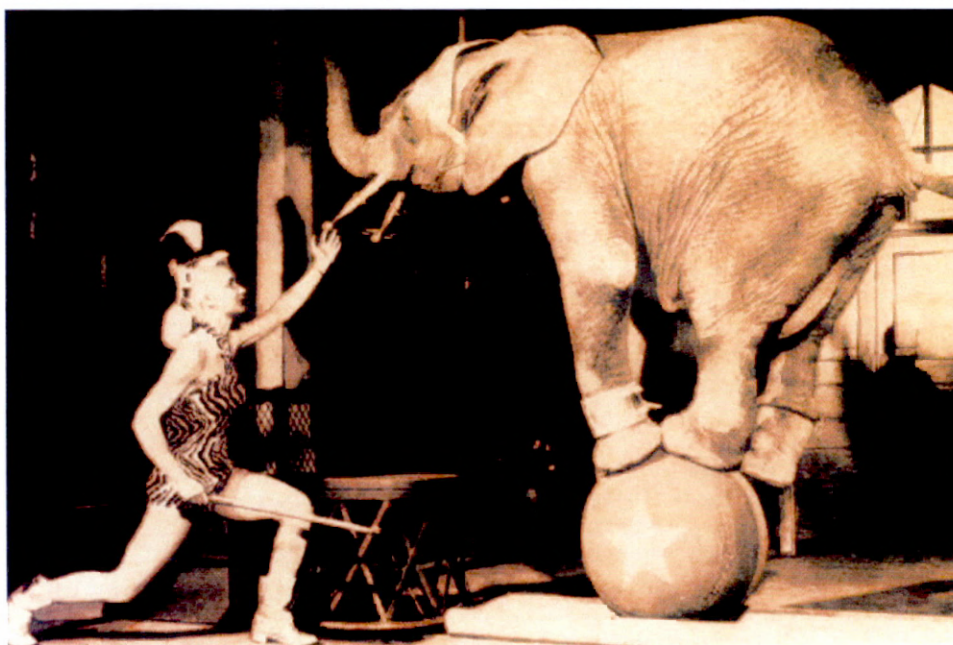
A typical Vargas midway. Pfening Archives.

accept Garden's offer of \$775. More important for him, however, was the opportunity to do what he liked best—perform as Prince Bogino with the big cats. His cage act—from John Cuneo's Hawthorn Corporation—consisted of eight male lions.

For the next two seasons—1976 and 1977—Ruffin shared arenas with Al Vidbel and his elephants; Lucio Cristiani and his comedy riding act, along with Cristiani's son, Armando, a juggler; and Tino Wallenda with his comedy wire routine, and Tino's wife, Olinka, on single trapeze.

His most memorable performance during the Garden years came at the opening in 1976 in the Montreal Forum, when the largest indoor audience to see his act applauded for

Eloise Berchtold. Pfening Archives.



six minutes at the conclusion.

"Looking back, I'll tell you what was great about that—being a minority and people accepting you for what you have accomplished."

In late 1977 Ruffin flew to Puerto Rico for a three-month engagement, again working the Cuneo lions, for producer Ed Migley. It was to

be his last gig as Prince Bogino. Joining him on the show was Bobby Gibbs with elephants. Harry Thomas opened with his cage act, and Ruffin closed. George Foreman, the heavyweight pugilist, saw Ruffin perform there. The former champ praised Junior's act, adding that he was surprised to see a black performer in the ring.

While there Ruffin met his second wife, Santa Perez, in early 1978. They were divorced in 1982.

Junior returned to Garden Bros. winter quarters after the Puerto Rican dates, where he and Ian Garden decided to disband the lion act and return the animals to Cuneo. Back in Florida, Ruffin visited Hoxie Cecere was working the big cats. Gee Gee Engesser, who also was visiting the show, tipped off Junior that a new circus was being framed in Quebec, Canada, and that Ruffin



might find a job there as tent master.

Ruffin telephoned the owner of Circus Gatini, who offered him a weekly salary of \$700 plus 25 per cent of the novelty sales. He accepted and took along John B. "Gypsy Red" Jackson as an assistant. Gypsy Red, who had followed the black trainer from Hoxie to Vargas, and now to Gatini, would figure prominently in Junior's future.

If Junior was expecting to reap financial rewards from the agreement, he would learn the folly of not pinning down the details. "I got screwed around," he said. "They were paying me one week Canadian [currency], one week American. And I always got the short end of the Canadian every time." He would lose 30 cents compared to the value of the American dollar.

Ruffin managed to laugh as he recalled the arrangement. But he spoke in solemn tones when he next described witnessing Eloise Berchtold's death in the ring at Circus Gatini.

#### RUFFIN RECALLS NEAR DEATH IN GRIP OF ELOISE BERCHTOLD'S CATS

Tension was in the air as Ruffin entered an arena at Kay Rosaire's training compound in Sarasota in late autumn 1978.

The dozen or so big cats waiting inside had not been worked in six months, ever since the brutal killing of their trainer, Eloise Berchtold, by a male Asian elephant during a performance near Montreal, Canada. And Ruffin, who had witnessed the 52-year old performer's death, had watched her working the cats only a few times.

Now, at the Florida compound, Ruffin was racking his brain for the order of the routines which the mixed-feline act was accustomed to following. He was carrying his usual chair and a whip, the tools of a fighting animal act in the tradition of



Cedric Walker, Kenneth Feld, Robert Houston and Junior Ruffin at the opening of the new UniverSoul Circus first season. Robert Houston photo.

his mentor, Clyde Beatty.

Suddenly, one of the male lions lurched at Ruffin, knocking aside the chair and biting him viciously on his left arm and shoulder. The lion began to drag the downed trainer around the dirt arena, attempting to apply a death grip to his stomach.

Although dazed and bleeding, Ruffin somehow managed to escape through the cage door. He can't remember how he got out.

His badly torn torso was starting to mend when he learned that Roy Wells and Patricia White would replace him, taking that same act on the road, and using the same cage which once had showcased the talents of the famed wild animal trainer, Mabel Stark.

Almost 30 years later, sitting in his home in North Port, Florida, Ruffin would point to the scars from the accident that ended his own performing career.

But that devastating encounter did not stop him from utilizing his other valuable circus skills. In fact, Ruffin went on to become Ringling's first African-American trainmaster.

Even a crippling injury to his foot in the Ringling rail yards in Venice in 1987 did not halt his work on behalf of the circus. Ruffin later served as a consultant in the founding of America's most successful black show, UniverSoul Circus. Today he's a popular after-dinner speaker at cir-

cus fan events in the Sarasota area.

But Junior was not thinking about his future when he opened the sidewall flaps to allow two of Eloise Berchtold's four African bulls into the Circus Gatini tent on May 5, 1978. Ruffin was probably the last person to speak to her. He had rarely spoken of that fateful event until prompted by the writer in a series of telephone conversations in

mid-2007.

Miss Berchtold died on a Friday afternoon, only five days into the show's inaugural season. In addition to his duties as tent master, Ruffin also was serving as temporary prop boss. He was substituting for Jorge Rozell, who was filling a Shrine date with his wire act for producer Hubert Castle. Ruffin had also inherited responsibility for Rozell's pony ride.

Conditions were far from ideal under the 130-foot-round, push-pole tent seating about 1,100 people in a three-ring configuration. Ruffin and his crew had raised the canvas on a shopping mall parking lot at Rock Forest, near Montreal. Snow began falling Monday afternoon on opening day, heavily blanketing the tent. Ruffin remembers he had to purchase four space heaters to melt the late-Spring covering, which threatened to collapse the white tops.

In addition to the icy run-off, water from a leaky seal tank near the bandstand had soaked the carpet in the middle ring, where the elephants performed.

Nor was the situation in the circus backyard any better for Miss Berchtold. She had driven the truck and trailer containing her big cats and five bears to the lot, while another driver had ferried the four African bulls. The driver wanted nothing to do with his cargo. Two teenagers, a boy and a girl, accompanied Eloise, but they had no experience handling the wild animals and were to prove no help.



The multi-talented Miss Berchtold, whom trainer Joe Frisco Sr. recently described as "just as comfortable changing the tires on her semi as she was in the ring," was feeding and cleaning the bull trailer and cat cages without any assistance. Ruffin said late one night as he was checking on the big top, he spotted Eloise cleaning the cat cages in freezing weather. Reputed to be financially independent, Miss Berchtold "with all the money they were making off her," chose to bed down in a sleeper, Ruffin said. Performing the round-the-clock caretaking duties probably sapped her energy and dulled her senses, he added.

In addition, her bulls were in musth, he pointed out. The four "had pegs on them out to here," Ruffin emphasized, gesturing with his massive arms spread wide. Miss Berchtold and her partner, wild-animal importer Morgan Berry, had raised the elephants from babies to 12-year-olds.

Ruffin contended—and Frisco confirmed—that a number of trainers had warned Miss Berchtold that her bulls would grow up to kill her. "When they're in musth, they'll attack a bale of hay," Ruffin explained.

So troublesome were the elephants that Miss Berchtold did not even let one of them out of the trailer during the stand, Ruffin said. On Monday, the opening day, she worked a trio. On Tuesday, the three began fighting in the ring.

Eloise wisely trimmed the act back to only one on Wednesday and Thursday. But, Ruffin recalled, the circus owner pointed out that his customers were paying to see not one but three performing elephants.

Miss Berchtold reluctantly agreed to appear for the Friday matinee performance with two males—Teak and Thai.

Ruffin had assisted the ring crew in tearing down Miss Berchtold's big cat arena after she opened the show. Now the vivacious trainer and the

prop workers were forced to adjust to a change in the performance order. The Zamperla riding family, seeing conditions under the big top, refused to perform their bareback routine. Miss Berchtold was notified that she would have to move up her bull act.

Immediately preceding the elephant act, as Ruffin remembers, was the Bertini family cradle act, featuring Henry and Erna Strazan. (The Czech-born Strazans were the parents of Olinka Wallenda, who performed on the single trap, while her husband, Tino, did a comedy wire act on the show.)



Ruffin loading the Monte Carlo train. Bob MacDougall photo.

During her routine with the two bulls, Eloise pitched three batons to Teak, who caught them with his trunk. As trained, Teak dropped the third baton. Normally he would pick it up. This time, he didn't. As Ruffin recalls, when Miss Berchtold leaned over to retrieve the baton, she tripped on the wet carpet and fell backward.

Teak immediately came down with his legs on his trainer. "You could hear his tusks grinding against the asphalt," Ruffin said, describing the trainer's brutal death.

While the panicking audience rushed for the exits, the prop workers began shouting at the attacking elephant, eventually forcing him off the performer's body. Then, said Ruffin, Teak stood at one side of the ring, calmly munching on hay that had been thrown at him, as if nothing had happened. Local residents,

carrying rifles, angrily executed the elephant on the spot.

Junior joined others chasing Thai when he also ran out of the tent. But the second elephant was not recaptured until Morgan Berry arrived the following day and lead Thai back to its trailer.

Circus Gatini quickly lined up a teenage replacement, Carol Buckley, to present a single elephant which Smokey Jones had broken for her. (Ms. Buckley later would start a preserve for retired elephants in rural Tennessee.) And Kay Rosaire brought her own cats to replace Miss Berchtold's mixed act.

Though Berry offered to give Miss Berchtold's cage act to Ruffin, the tentmaster decided against it, saying he had no way to take care of the animals. Berry returned the cage act and elephants to Woodland, Washington, and Ruffin finished out the season with Gatini.

In the meantime, Rosaire sought out

Ruffin to be her partner in taking over the Berchtold-Berry big cats and booking them on a second Gatini unit. Although he initially resisted the opportunity to get back into the ring, Ruffin left Gatini following its season-closing stand at Erie, Pennsylvania, and drove his mobile home to the Rosaire compound in Sarasota.

Junior's vicious mauling occurred the first time he stepped into the arena with the idled animals on Fruitville Road. "I almost lost my arm," he said.

Since neither he nor Rosaire had medical insurance, Ruffin used a \$600 loan from a friend to buy an airplane ticket to Puerto Rico. There he lived with his wife while receiving treatment.

Returning broke to Sarasota in early 1979, Ruffin was fortunate to land a job as a prop hand on the newly framed, 20-car Monte Carlo Circus, also known as Festival International du Cirque Spectacular.



Launched by Irvin and Kenneth Feld, the one-ringer was designed to play indoor arenas in cities normally bypassed by their larger Ringling Red and Blue units. It was destined to last less than a full season.

"Well, you know, I hadn't been on a railroad show since 1956 [on the Clyde Beatty Circus]," Ruffin said. "And I was happy to get that job. They gave me a bunk and a little place to hang my clothes that was very nice."

The train crew went to bed about 3:00 a.m. Wednesday, February 14, after loading out the new railer in the Venice yards. When Ruffin awoke about 8:30 a.m., he noticed the train was not moving, as was expected.

Stepping outside, the prop hand discovered Monte Carlo's manager, Jim McGarrity, in a heated discussion with Baker Brown, the general manager of the new unit. The new trainmaster, Ray Flores, came from a railroad background but had no circus experience.

The cause of the prolonged delay, Junior learned, was that the bumper of the gilly bus was hanging over the end of a flat car, preventing the crossover plate from being raised into the locked position.

"Now they couldn't leave it like this, because when they went around a curve, it would just tear off. So they were arguing about how they were going to have to reload the flatcars." So Junior, seeing an obvious solution to the problem, interrupted the heated discussion. Baker Brown initially dismissed Ruffin, but he persisted.

"Damn," he said. "All they have to do is take the bumper off the front of the bus, and (the crossover plate) will go right up." This task quickly accomplished, the train headed out for its inaugural date in Providence, Rhode Island, on February 20, 1979. As it turned out, Brown obviously tucked away Junior's time-saving tip for future reference.

On arrival in Providence, the

train's water pipes began icing up—it was 30 degrees below zero outside. Because of his own background as a mechanic and welder, Ruffin was given the responsibility of keeping water pumped into the hoses and to place heaters in the animal cars.

He also helped with the set-up of the show, which featured a video screen (shades of the 2006-07 Ringling Blue unit) onto which the images of circus stars receiving their Gold Clowns from Prince Ranier at Monte Carlo were projected. The performance was built around daredevil Elvin Bale; Karoly's cage and horse-tiger acts; the Richter family, with their bareback act and ele-

pneumonia and had to be hospitalized for nine days..

Later, while the show train was parked on the Billy Goat Hill rail siding near the St. Louis Checkerdome, Ruffin was summoned to the road office of Baker Brown.

"Baker was following us because he was back on the show. Things were in chaos." Ruffin thought he was in hot water. The executive immediately posed a question: "Junior, can you handle that train?"

"I said, 'Certainly.' Of course, I had no idea [if I actually could]."

Asked how much he was making, Ruffin said his weekly salary was \$200, less \$35 in deductions.

"Baker said, 'I'm going to add another \$250 to that.' And I said, 'Who do I have to kill?'"

"You don't have to kill nobody," Brown replied. "We're going to make you trainmaster."

The General Manager told Ruffin to keep the news under his hat since trainmaster Ray Flores had not been informed of the change. But Ruffin and others had a hint that Flores was about to blow the show, since he had rented a U-Haul trailer at the previous stop and removed most of his belongings from

the train.

On load-out night, as the train crew was pumping air into the coaches, Flores said, "Junior, you might as well get on that train. I don't know why you're hanging around here."

Ruffin replied, "Ray, I guess there's no better time to tell you than now. Ray, there's no sense in your hanging around any more."

The surprised Flores asked, "What do you mean?"

"And I said, 'They made me trainmaster 10 days ago.'"

Flores, who already had a taxi waiting at the rail yards, left abruptly. "Because he was going to send the train on, and he wasn't going to say nothing."

It would not be until the train reached Richmond, Virginia, that McGarrity would give the keys to the



Junior Ruffin moving a parade wagon in Venice. Bob MacDougall photo.

phants, Luis Munoz' low-wire routine; Gene Mendez's high-wire act, and the Dobritch perch number.

Almost from the start, the train unloading and loading process was in disarray, resulting in numerous delays. The show also was not experiencing good business, he said, partially because of its newness and partially because of its title. Veteran promoter Bobby Snowden, visiting Ruffin along the route, was said to remark that the show's name sounded more like an automobile than a circus.

When the train later pulled into Syracuse, New York, Ruffin, who had brought along only tropical clothing from Puerto Rico, caught



trainmaster's suite to Ruffin and then only at Baker Brown's insistence. Ruffin moved his few belongings from his cramped quarters to the relatively plush suite, which occupied one half of a coach.

In the meantime, the train crew, under Ruffin's direction, started producing noticeable results. "After I had found out how to do it, I called the train engineer an hour ahead of time, and when the last flat was loaded, I would have pumped the train."

A short time later, after less than six months on the road, the Monte Carlo unit returned to the Ringling Circus World lot near Orlando, where it remained until the other two trains came back at the end of their respective seasons. Junior now was in charge of disbanding the 20-car train.

He then took over responsibilities as transportation boss for the Blue unit. His crew unloaded and loaded wagons and ring stock at each site. He remained with that show for the 1980-82 seasons. Bob McDougal, the unit general manager, fired Junior during the later season. His gregarious nature may have been a factor.

"I accused him of mistreating me," Ruffin recalls. "He didn't like the idea that the Felds, when they came to the show, would sometimes come around and say something to me. And [McDougal] thought I was some sort of stoolie. So they made up a story to get rid of me."

Ruffin next went to work for carnival owner Pat Guthrie. "He had a little circus, Floyd Bros., out of Hugo, Oklahoma. We carried the equipment in one truck—the seats and everything. I put that little tent up. And I worked there for two or three months and then came back [to Florida] that fall."

A former co-worker, Neil Simpson, told Ruffin that Ringling "needed somebody to wash the trains and paint them" in the Venice yards. His new boss was Charlie Smith, retired Red unit trainmaster, who was now in charge of recycling train cars. Ruffin had known Smith since 1956. At that time Junior was a cage boy on the Clyde Beatty Circus, and Charlie had joined the show at Gonzales, Texas, during its last weeks on rail.



Mr. and Mrs. Manuel Ruffin. Ruffin collection.

For the next five years, Ruffin was a fixture at the yards. It was there, as the Blue unit train was being loaded in early 1987, that Ruffin's active career in the circus industry came to a sudden end.

Ruffin, who had been called back to the Venice yards to assist a somewhat green crew, was poling a mechanic's wagon, the first of three being loaded on a flat car. After the first and second wagons had been successfully pushed up the runs by an inexperienced Jeep driver, the third wagon was pushed too fast onto the flat, causing the mechanic's wagon to jackknife. The impact knocked the wagon tongue out of Junior's grip. Ruffin was knocked from the flat car onto the ground. The accident crushed Ruffin's right leg, almost severing it above the

ankle. Charlie Smith and his wife Kitty witnessed the accident. Ruffin spent the next 70 days in a Sarasota hospital, where doctors were able to reattach the leg. Following five major surgeries, he was placed on permanent disability.

Ruffin especially paid tribute to John B. "Gypsy Red" Jackson, who stayed in his North Port home while Junior was in the hospital and who remained to help him through the ordeal of recovery.

In 1998, Ruffin married for a third time. His wife, the former Agata Szumiejko, a native of Poland, is a child welfare case worker for the State of Florida. He is an active member of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Nowadays Junior keeps touch by phone with many of his former colleagues—Charlie Smith, King Charles Weathersby and Gypsy Red Jackson among them. He is a frequent guest speaker at the same clubs in the Sarasota area where he earlier had been denied entrance because of his skin color. He continues to spin the jackpots of his varied and colorful career, garnering the appreciative attention of kinkers and fans alike.

Junior's tales are not a sign of braggadocio.

As ex-pitcher-sportscaster Dizzy Dean once told a woman listener who had complained about what she considered on-air boasting by the legendary baseball player:

"Lady, if you've been there, and you've done it, it ain't braggin'."

Manual "Junior" Ruffin has "been there" in the circus world, and he's been "with it" in every sense.

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# More Ranblings From Red Sonnenberg

By Red Sonnenberg

During rehearsals at the Sarasota winter quarters, John Murray Anderson had the ballet girls riding camels and elephants in a new number he was introducing in the show for the coming season. Quite a number of the new girls were First of Mays and one of them, Laura May McKenzie, had just arrived that day from her home in Terre Haute, Indiana. After her first ride on an elephant, Laura May, who had a pretty bad time of it riding a camel and was pretty badly shook up on her first ride on the elephant, was asked by Anderson how she liked it. Here is the way she put it, "I like to say something nice about every new experience I have, but the best I can say about riding an elephant is it is a little, yes, just a wee bit better than riding a camel."

Laura May, who later on married Mike Petrello, the prop boss of Big Bertha, stuck with it and was on the show for years and she was one of the best and nicest troupers I have ever had the privilege to troupe with.

One winter while in Sarasota, Joe Trosey, the bugman on Ringling, decided to go to Miami, as he wanted to go to the race track to do his part in improving the breed. After a few days, I got a call from him saying that his system for beating the ponies hadn't panned out as he figured, and that he was empty and needed a little stuff. So I inquired, "Joe, how soon do you need this money?" And he answered, "To give you a pretty good idea, this call is collect."

Arthur Hoffman, side show manager with the Walter L. Main show, had as one of his attractions, an ossified or petrified man as they were called, and a lady who did sculpting. As

the season wore on, a romance started between the two and they got married. Arthur, in later years, in telling of the romance, which landed in divorce courts in less than a year, said "He had a heart of stone, and she was a chiseler," and further added, "They got what they deserved, they got each other."

Bert Bowers, one of the owners of the American Circus Corporation, never liked to visit another show, he always said, because he always saw

John Ringling North. All illustrations are from the Pfening Archives.



something around another show that he could not have or get.

When John Ringling North arrived in Canton, Ohio that Saturday, two days before the final closing of Big Bertha in Pittsburgh in 1956, he had one of the most serious expressions on his kisser of any man I have ever seen as he entered the menagerie. It was side walled on a very dirty lot and looked like hell, and if I could read a man's mind, I would say, he was thinking, "This can't be Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, the Greatest Show on Earth."

On the lot of Ringling in Portland I was talking with press agent Frank Braden, who was about to leave for L.A., his next town. Frank said to me "Red, why don't you go with me as far as Frisco (our next town and Frank knew I was always ready to travel)." Later that night while sitting in the club car on the train, Frank made one of his classic remarks, "This is the life, riding first class on a crack streamliner of the Southern Pacific, and still people think we are undergoing the hardships of circus life."

Doc Palmer had at one time Palmer Bros. Circus, which changed titles and owners more times than any other show I ever knew. At different times the show was called Howe's Great London, Lincoln Bros, Palmer Bros., Golden Bros. and the last time around in 1926 was called Lee Bros. All of them were good solid grifters with all the pastimes and amusements of the old west with them. George Washington Christy was the last to operate it, and after a few years, he sold the equipment to a fella from Detroit by the name of Worthem and shipped it to Alexandria, Louisiana from South Houston, Texas, but it never got off the ground as Worthem ran out of stuff, so Christy got it back and I believe that is the last time it trouped. Some of the wagons are now at the Baraboo Museum.



Most dangerous age in a showman's life is the period between being a First of May and a philosopher around the stake and chain wagon. And another problem of circus managers is how to win friends who owe them their shirts. Funniest thing on the lot: A legal adjuster trying to look impressed while listening to a minor beef. Troupers only sure cure for missed meal cramps is an early opening. They talk about grift

said he didn't care if it leaned to the right or to the left, just as long as it was lean.

Remember the days when a circus was short a calliope player and there was always someone around who could one finger "How dry I am." When someone pronounces calliope cal-lie-o-pea you can tell they were never with a circus that had one.

When a lady walks under a red wagon awning and all the staff mem-

Wouldn't it be great if we were able to have dinner in the Sparks show cookhouse again? Mrs. Addie Sparks saw to it that everyone got the best.

I joined the Elks while trouping with the Cole Bros. World Toured Circus with about ten others on the show. We joined the Osawatomie, Kansas lodge which a lot of circus people joined in those days. I believe it was Gallup, N. M. where we were initiated. When they finished with the initiation, one of the local brothers asked if any of the new brothers wished to say anything. I was sitting between Eddie Rogers and Jim Moran, two good ribbing characters. They both gave me the elbow in my ribs and I had to jump up of course against my will and the good brother said, "Yes, Brother Sonnenberg." I was at a loss for words, so I said how happy we were to join the Elks etc. Then I made a big mistake. I invited them to be our guests at the evening show. Well, it seemed everybody in Gallup was an Elk that night.

In spite of inflation any ticket seller flashing a big BR is accused of rehashing or cutting cake. What the circus biz needs is a handleless sledge hammer to avoid blisters.

Things we don't hear anymore: "Hold you horses, the elephants are coming."

"Where the ring curbs now stand

The Oriental Village at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933.



W. W. Gentry in 1903.

shows, I saw the customers roused more by the butchers and ushers on the so called Sunday School shows than on a grift show, because on the grift shows they did it with finesse. The old time grifters were artists in their line. The world changes. The connection men, broad tossers, nut players, and spindle workers are a lost art now. First thing a beginner must learn is that all of his profits should come from the customers, not the show.

On the Gentry dog and pony show owned by H. B. Gentry the piece de resistance in the cookhouse was pancakes and fried apples and when we played around Bloomington, Indiana, all of H. B.'s relatives would freeloader in the cookhouse and there wouldn't be room for the hands to eat. They rang a bell instead of raising the flag and how the relatives would run when they heard that bell.

Pittsburgh Goettman, old time Sells-Floto hand, went into a restaurant in Denver and told the hash slinger he wanted eggs over and lean bacon. He

bers rise and offer her a chair it has to be the boss's wife.

A nut player once said to me, "Never blow the whistle on another man's grift."

It never has been settled which group, the press agents or the bill-posters, is responsible for big houses.





a mammoth stage will be erected.

"He's ahead cooking in the bill car.

"You're fined \$2.00 for missing parade."

Then there was the black woman who complained that a concert ticket seller shouted, "If you give up 2 bits, you can stay for the concert with lots of cuttin' up and carryin' on." She said, "All I seed was a lot of tearin' down a totin' out."

At the Oriental Village at the Chicago World's Fair in 1933, if you weren't a circus man, you could not light because we were so clannish. Among the circus men there were Leonard Aylesworth, later boss canvasman on Ringling; Ralph Nobel, boss canvasman on Fred Buchanan's circuses; Little Henry, boss ticket seller on Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus; Earl Janney, 24 hour man from 101 Ranch Wild West show; Al Humke, boss ticket seller on Sparks Circus; Jakie Besser, boss butcher on Cole Bros.; Rosey Rosenburg, white ticket wagon on Sparks; Bennie Levine, ticket seller on Gentry Bros. Circus; Ernie Naatz, novelties on Ringling; Red Davison, candy butcher on Sells-Floto; Fred Smythe, later Big Bertha side show manager; Manny Gunn, contracting agent on Robbins Bros.; Kookoo Dolan, ticket seller from John Robinson; Ray Daley, Howes Great London side show manager; Bert St. John, white wagon on Sells-Floto; Lettie Baker, cooch dancer on Fred Buchanan's circus; Otis Hackman, side show ticket seller on Robbins Bros.; Charley Martin, announcer on John Robinson; Hamda Ben and Gully Gully, flageolet players from Doc Ogden's side show on 101 Ranch; Jim Barnes, white ticket wagon on Sells-Floto; and myself. Everyone knew the score.

I worked on the movie *The Greatest Show on Earth* two months in Sarasota and on the road under canvas, working with the camera crew right alongside of Cecil DeMille who directed it. Once we started shooting, I never did see or know of



Cornel Wilde and Betty Hutton in *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

him stopping to take a drink or go to the washroom. He was 69, and that was his 69th picture. One day in Sarasota, we built a high platform that went to the very top of the big top. The only way to get to the top was to climb a ladder. DeMille had to go up and do some focusing. As he started up the ladder, one of the grips from Hollywood, named Jack, said "Wait a minute C.B. I will help you." DeMille turned to me and said "And who is going to help him?" Jack was older than DeMille.

Mr. DeMille was truly a remarkable man. There were always pests getting to him but he was always very gracious to them. One day Sally Rand, the fan dancer, was visiting on the set. His girl Friday was named Eleanor. She had been with him for years, and was his buffer with the general public. She always kept him informed. Eleanor said to DeMille "That is Sally Rand over there." "Oh yes," he said. "Bring her over," and they talked like a couple of old school chums.

There was a part in the picture where Cornel Wilde, who played the Great Sebastian, comes back to the circus after being hurt. Clowns Frankie Saluto and Jimmie Armstrong run to Charlton Heston,

who played the part of Brad Braden, the manager of the circus. They hollered, "Hey Brad, the great Sebastian is back." Well, we had to shoot that scene quite a few times because every time Jimmie Armstrong shouted, "the great Sebastian is back," it sounded like "the bastard is back."

One of the greatest feats I ever saw performed was by Fay Alexander, the great flyer, who was also a very good program seller when he worked for me on Big Bertha in his spare moments. Fay doubled for Cornel Wilde, the Great Sebastian, when he is supposed to be working without a net. Deacon Blanchfield bulldozed a big hole in the ground over which they

laid the net and camouflaged it. Fay made the leap from the bar to the net and did it quite a number of times under the direction of three great former flyers in their own right, Art and Tony Concello and Tuffy Genders. This was one of the greatest circus feats I ever saw a circus artist perform.

Mollie Bailey.





The only active lady circus owners I knew of were Rose Killian and Mollie Bailey, both from Texas, and the present day Bonnie Kernan, co-owner of Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros., Sells and Gray, and King Bros. circuses. These ladies took an active part in running their shows.

I used to tell my program sellers on Ringling: "You fellas haven't a thing to worry about. After this, we are going up into Maine to get some of that potato money, then some more in smokestack country, then Chi for ten days, then some of those nice grassy lots in Wisconsin, then over the hump to the coast to Frisco and L.A., then the cotton money down yonder, so it looks like you fellas are going to have a nice easy winter."

Waste of breath is for an old timer to tell a First of May that paydays aren't everything.

Early day ticket seller who started at \$3.00 a week, cakes and an upper berth retired wealthy because he was thrifty enough to bank \$300.00 a week.

In Hayracker, Iowa, no one paid much attention to the Hawkins girl who lived on the Berkshire place until she returned to her native haunts as a cooch dancer in the annex on the Yankee Robinson circus.

Something reminded Windy Van Hooten of the Windy Van Hooten Circus that winter was in the air. It was either his seedy Benny or his thinning BR.

Talk about the nick of time. Ernie Baldwin and I joined Floyd King's Cole Bros. World Toured Circus just as the train was pulling out of World Point, Montana after being with the ill fated Buck Jones Wild West in 1929. Those were the days when country billers could exchange litho passes for country dinners, also favors from the farmers' daughters.

Good news to all circus managers was to not catch up with Wait Bros. paper.

When the Cole Bros. Circus closed suddenly in Bloomington, Illinois in August, 1938, the people with the show were not told they were closing and the next morning they found themselves in the Rochester, Ind. winter quarters instead of LaSalle, Ill., where they were to play the next day. Zack Terrell, the manager, gave a little talk to the people (they had not been paid off) about the closing. Now Zack wore a big diamond ring and while giving his little talk, Otto Griebing, the famous clown, piped up and said, "Mr. Terrell, would you mind shielding your hand a bit, that big diamond is blinding me."

I'd like to say something in defense of circus grifters. They only follow a pattern laid down by their forefathers in the days of Barnum. Away from the circus the grifters were just as honest as anybody else. They were the most generous, the first to give to those in need. If I'm lucky enough to crash St. Peter's main entrance, I expect to see some of my lucky boy friends holding the gate wide for me to enter, for the good they done out balanced anything wrong they may have done. I never knew a hypocrite to do anything good for anybody. I know one of two circus owners around today who had nothing but grift shows who don't want to mention them today.

One thing a side show talker does not have to worry about that other public

speakers do is writing a speech that will put an audience to sleep. A good side show talker always has his audience awake and listening.

We need to recognize the fact that no showman grows stronger by striving constantly for more leisure and less work. One thing I believe, no one ever saw around a circus was twin clowns. Mud is hell around a circus, but rain which causes mud can sometimes be a blessing, especially in farm territory where a light, steady rain can prevent the farmers from working in the fields, so they come to the circus.

Wild animals can be trained, but tamed, that is another thing. I don't believe the question whether a zebra is white with black stripes or black with white stripes has ever been settled. I know this, the zebra is one critter that is really hard to train, and that they do their best work with their hind legs.

Jerry Mugivan was president of the American Circus Corp., which owned and operated Sells-Floto, Hagenbeck and Wallace, John Robinson, Sparks and Al G. Barnes circuses in 1929. It also owned the titles Yankee Robinson, Buffalo Bill's Wild West, Gollmar Bros., and Howes Great London until he sold out to John Ringling in 1929.

Here are a few tidbits about Jerry, The Turk as he was called, told to me by the late Frank Braden, the great press agent. The first show he owned was The Great Van Amberg Circus. Five days before the show opened, the billposters came into quarters at Centropolis, Mo., and they built in paper lockers, berths and everything in the old advance car. The day the billers joined out they were greatly interested in a portion of the herald which showed the Van Amberg show on wagons, and under the picture appeared the line "How we traveled 40 years ago." Under that was a gorgeous circus train with the line "The way we travel now." That night the men bunked in the car for the first time. It rained, it poured, and within five minutes the whole crew was astir. The men had wash basins, buckets and tarpaulins over their heads to shield them from the leaks in the old roof. It was miserable

Zack Terrell.





going. One ancient trouper got a laugh when he disclaimed, "How we traveled 40 years ago is the way we travel now."

We had bought from the National Show Print Co. in Chicago a sleeper which had been in use by a hall show. On it in big letters was the name of the show: "For Mother's Sake." We shipped it to Kansas City via East St. Louis, where we attached another car we had bought for \$500.

We had Ikey Lewis, one of the joint men, bringing the car in. When they reached the K.C. yards, a burly yardman awakened Ikey, "Say Cull," he growled, "that other car is named, For Mother's Sake, what in hell is the name of this one?" "For Christ's Sake," Ikey roared sleepily as he ducked under the blankets again.

Frank Gardiner was equestrian director of a show I was on. He had three high school horses with the show, and Jim Ward working for him. It seemed that Gardiner owed Ward salary and the latter threatened to sue. Frank offered to settle by giving Ward one of the horses. Since it was a good horse, Jim agreed, so they finished the season amicably together. However, when the show closed Gardiner presented Ward with a bill for feed which came to exactly the amount of Gardiner's original debt to Ward. Jim could not pay and lost the horse. It was a painless method of paying off an obligation.

In Samokin, Pa., a tough miner said he would go into the circus free or get licked. He got licked.

George Ade, the Indiana humorist, was a great lover of the circus and would visit the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus. One day he would be seen driving a 4-horse team, then he would be waiting on tables in the cookhouse. He was all over the lot in different positions every day. The workingmen on the show did not know him and they thought he was just bumming his way over the road with the circus.



Jerry Mugivan.

The funeral of Jerry Mugivan will be remembered throughout the circus world as one of the most elaborate ever held. Two huge elephants pushed Mugivan's 1800 pound casket up a hill to its final resting place in Peru, Indiana. The casket cost \$10,000 and had two lids riveted on and a rose sealer was then applied.

Playing Port Chester, N. Y. with the Gentry show, Walter Baird was working the connection and cutting a little cake (the circus kind) when up walked a young fellow. Walter asked him for the usual accommodation and beat him for a sawbuck. After getting to his seat in the big top, he realized he had been beat for ten dollars. This fellow thought it was an easier way to make a sawbuck than his current job, and he up and joined the show. He became a fair country connection man himself and a very good candy pitchman selling Mother Murray's famous confection.

The first day Nick Richer was with the show, Mark Smith, the boss can-

vasman, put a sledge hammer in his duke and said: "This is a croquet mallet, enjoy yourself." Nick finally got a job selling side show tickets. When I saw him calling them back with a rubber sponge, I knew he finally had it made. The last I ever heard or saw of Nick was with Cole Bros. Floyd King sent Nick down to the railroad agent with the money to pay for the next move. Well, Nick just kept right on going.

One of happier days in a boss canvasman's life is the day he finds he has a full crew. Circuses I have been with have been stranded. I have been broke and badly bent a few times, but I never have been red lighted or doubled up in a three high berth. First of Mays did not pay attention to my advice, but then they did not have to because they soon found out about closing without a BR when the season ends.

I was a very versatile showman on H. B. Gentry's dog and pony show handling scratch, geedus or just plain old money. I just about stuck my nose into everything on those small shows. You had to if you wanted to make a buck. On the come in, I worked the outside stand, then went inside and worked the candy pitch, then worked the seats with ice cream and when the show started I took over the front door from H. B., caught the late comers, made the sheriff's sale on the reserves, and on the blow off I worked novelties. So all in all I made a very nice buck. I rode overland with Frank Gentry who was the fixer for his brother. One day down in Texas we were riding along at a pretty good clip as Frank was a pretty fast driver. We were down around Cuero where they raise a lot of turkeys. I looked ahead and saw a bunch of turkeys in the middle of the road. In those days, cattle, hogs, and everything else were all over the road in Texas. I thought Frank naturally saw the turkeys, but all of a sudden we hit them. Well, I never saw so many feathers and turkeys flying at one time in my life. It was a wonder we did not wreck the car, but we sure got the hell out of there fast.

Doc Ogden, side show manager with Lee Bros. Circus, had a freak



who also worked on canvas. One morning while putting up the side show top, this freak said to Bill O'Day, the side show boss canvasman, that he was tired. A townner overheard him say that and said to the freak, "You show people are always tired." The freak answered, "You would be tired too, if you did what I do." When asked what he did that was so hard, the freak replied, "I eat glass, razor blades, nails etc." and that is just what he did on the show.

Noyelles Burkhart.

One winter at the Sarasota winter quarters, Noyelles Burkhart, legal adjuster of Big Bertha, asked me if I had a picture of Possum, whose job in quarters was to walk around the lot with a big bag slung over his shoulders and spear all the trash and paper lying around. Well, Possum loved his groceries and always was a little dusty. He was also big and very fat. So I took a picture of Possum, spear, bag and all, and it was quite a photo. Well, it seems that Burkhart's high school class was having a reunion in his hometown of Peru, Indiana and the reunion committee wanted a recent picture of him. He sent them the picture of Possum, saying it was him.

The longest and windiest opening I ever heard was by a fellow by the name of MacDonald who had the pit show on Gentry. All he had in there was an old beat up Arkansas razor-back hog, but when he got through telling them what a ferocious wild beast it was, some of the people were afraid to go in, but a lot of them did.

Most troupers hardly ever played Nevada. I played Reno, Elko and a few other towns twice in the same season, first with Buck Jones Wild West then with Cole Bros. World Toured Circus.

Did you know that the Great Windy Van Hooten Circus was the only circus to use glass center poles with gold fish swimming around inside. It makes a nice flash when all

lit up at night (that is the poles, not Windy). Windy also used a rubber expanding top. That way when he had a packed house, all he had to do was stretch the top. Windy usually stayed out all winter, as he usually did not have enough B. R. to winter the show. When it turns cold down yonder, he figures his joints in the side show will cause enough heat to keep everyone warm as toast.



Fred Buchanan, owner of the old Yankee Robinson, World Bros. and Robbins Bros. Circuses, would have made a good weather forecaster. The territory Fred's shows played had plenty of bad storms, tornados or what have you.

When a storm came up, Fred would look the situation over, and if it didn't look right, he would tell Ralph Noble, his boss canvaman, to take it down. He was usually right. He saved his big top many a time by his good judgment. It was very rare when he had a blow down. One winter on the magic carpet in Chicago, Danny Odom, manager of the Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus said, "Fred, you don't have many blow downs, how come with the territory you play?" Fred answered, "I just keep my eyes peeled to the sky." Buchanan was about the only man who out smarted Jerry Mugivan when he sold him the Yank show in the fall of 1920.

Buchanan might have been a very

Merry-go-round and Ferris wheel on the Yankee Robinson Circus.

good weather forecaster, but he did not forecast the great depression as his Robbins Bros. Circus went by the way of the quay in Mobile, Ala. in September 1931 and limped back to Bill Hall's farm in Lancaster, Mo.

He never had another circus on rails. When Buchanan had the Yankee Robinson Circus, he usually had a cop either walking toward him or walking away from him.

Blackie Baker was the trainmaster of the Robbins Circus. One day he had a shouting ruckus with Buchanan. When it was all over, Buchanan said to Blackie, "You shouldn't have done that to me, Blackie. I am getting to be an old man. I might have had a heart attack." Blackie answered, "Mr. Buchanan, then you should start acting like one."

Fred Buchanan was the circus man that the book *Gus The Great* was based on. If you were ever with a grift show, you would surely know what is meant by being dough-popped.

The Cook and Cole Circus opened in Manning, Iowa on May 21, 1927 and closed in Fairmount, Minnesota on June 2, 1927 so a historian would not have to write very much. How about this: Its career was brief, it's B R short and its finish sad. Leo Crook, former boss butcher with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, lost his life savings of \$40,000 in that venture.

The courthouse in Baraboo, Wisconsin, the hometown of the Ringling Bros. and Gollmar Brothers, has murals carved on the outside walls depicting circus scenes.

During the war while playing Napa, California with Art Concello's Russell Bros. Pan Pacific Circus, I had the concessions with the show. I





met the superintendent of the California institution for the insane while making arrangements for several hundred inmates to be our guests at the matinee. He had three fellows with him, and here is what he said regarding them, "I think these fellows will fit right in with you." I didn't like that crack, but with the war time shortage of help even fellows from an insane institution were welcome. I turned them over to Bob Reynolds, the super of the show, and he put them to work on props. They turned out ok and stayed all season.

How do you tell one elephant from another is beyond me. I worked for years along side of the bulls and could never tell one from the other, but bull hands tell me that each has its own personality. I have a brother in law who raises hogs and he can tell one from the other very easily, so I suppose it is the way you look at them.

Here is one told by press agent Bev Kelly: The lot in Freeport, Illinois is so beautiful that once when Dexter Fellows, Big Bertha's press agent, and Cow O'Connell, 24 hour agent, were arguing about immortality, Dex had asked Cow what was his idea of the hereafter, O'Connell answered, "The lot in Freeport."

The only circus I know of on rails that played two towns in one day was Christy Bros. They gave a matinee in Williston, North Dakota and then made a run of 93 miles to Wolf Point, Montana for a night show. I believe it was either in 1926 or 1929.

While getting a haircut in a barber shop in Mississippi with the Walter L. Main Circus, a native came in the shop. The barber said, "Eph, did you go to the circus?" "You bet," said Eph. "How was it?" asked the barber. "Very good," said Eph. "How much did you pay?" Eph said, "Well, I didn't right figure it all out, you kinda pay as you go along."

And then there was the time with Ringling, when it was still under canvas and still Big Bertha, that we played Hollywood, California at the Pan Pacific parking lot. A Jewish

woman came in the show a short time after it started. I was sitting at my trunk, which was my office, counting the day's take, which was quite a bit as Hollywood was very good for books or programs as a layman would say. "Var do I go?" said the lady, I stopped counting, "Straight ahead," I told her, and started counting again. "Var? Var?" she countered again and again. I said "straight ahead" and pointed to the connection and started counting again. Finally I said, "Oh, lady, why don't you take the elevator." "You got an elevator, Var is it?" she said. Once more I stopped counting, stood up, and pointed again to the connection. She left perfectly contented. But the moral is: I don't think she found that elevator.



agent. One winter Mike walked every inch of the way from San Francisco to Lynn, Massachusetts, his old home town.

Fred Buchanan.

The connection men around a gift show were never fixed to work. When the show fixer would go down to see the man at the city hall to spread for the joints, he would never spread for the short. The connection men just went to work. On the very rare towns where the joints couldn't work, the men in the connection always worked.

When I was a kid, Gollmar Bros. Circus came to my hometown of Kenosha, Wisconsin. Another kid and I side walled ourselves under the menagerie. As we stuck our heads under the sidewalk, one of the elephants dropped a big cannonball right on my head. That was my initiation into the circus.

Toward the end of the 1948 season, I asked Possum, a member of the layout gang on Big Bertha, if he had saved any money. "I sure have," he answered, and shoved an old beat up poke at me. I opened it and counted Possum's winter b. r. of 12 dusty one dollar bills.

Possum was one of George Blood's best customers in the cookhouse. He sure loved his groceries. In 1947 Eddie Gallagher, the head porter, made Possum a porter in one of the workingmen's sleepers. You know every porter had a place at one end of his car where he sold food to the men when they came from the lot hungry. Possum would go to town, get his provisions, bring them to his car, then get hungry and eat almost all of them himself.

In 1956 in Madison Square Garden with the Big Show a drunk in the balcony climbed over the railing and onto the aerial ballet rigging and was going hand over hand when he fell to the ground. Dave Blanchfield, the



Russell Bros. Pan Pacific Circus ticket wagon in 1945.

During the war when they rationed cigarettes and they were very hard to come by, I asked Walking Mike Doyle, calliope player on Art Concello's Russell Bros. Pan Pacific Circus, to pick up some cigarettes if he saw any in the towns we made. Mike got his moniker because he liked to walk and he made the downtown district every day in every town we played. So one day we played Redding, California and Mike saw a big line of people in front of a drug store, so in line went Mike. After a long wait he finally made it to the end of the line only to find it was a line of people buying tickets to the circus from the downtown ticket



Deacon, was standing in front of the boxes on the track and when the drunk fell, he landed right in front of him. The Deacon had turned his back and as he turned around again, the drunk was laying on the track. Deacon looked at him and said to a lady sitting in one of the boxes, "Where did he come from?"

David Blanchfield.

"Up there," she said, and pointed upwards. The kicker was that the drunk wasn't even badly hurt.

I went overland with Joe Trosey who had the bug (Chameleon) concession on Ringling-Barnum. We left Lewiston, Maine for Quebec City, Canada. Joe had a trailer where he carried his bugs, turtles, food and all the equipment. While crossing the border that night rather late, we stopped at the customs and immigration station. We went inside and told the officials we were with the Ringling Circus. We gave them some passes. They wanted to talk circus, because up in that part of the world, they did not see Big Bertha very often. Finally, taking our leave, the inspectors walked out with us. We had not mentioned the trailer, and one of the inspectors said "Oui, you have zee trailer; what you have in it?" Joe said, "Oh, a couple chairs and planks." The inspector said, "Come in, we must make zee report." In we went and Joe made out a report that he had 6 planks and 6 chairs. They never did look in the trailer, so we left. That winter after the show had closed and Joe was home in Sarasota, he got a notice from Canadian customs wanting to know what happened to the 6 chairs and 6 planks, as they had no record of them leaving Canada, only entering.

After leaving the customs station that night, I asked Joe how come he said 6 chairs etc. He said that was the first thing that

came into his mind. That night we stayed in a hotel in St. George, Quebec. We could not find anyone who spoke English, so the hotel sent for a padre who spoke a little English. Believe it or not, no one we talked to had ever heard of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. But the audience in Quebec was one of the greatest I ever saw. I believe that was only the second time we played Quebec City. After the performance people came up to me and said how wonderful the show was. The people of Quebec did not take their blessings for granted.

During General Eisenhower's first campaign for the presidency in 1952, I appointed myself a one man campaign committee for him. To every person who came up to my program box on Big Bertha that season, I said, "I hope you like Ike." I never had anyone who resented it, and as I sold thousands of programs every day I believe I was the biggest single campaigner for Ike that year.

Gargantua



When Gargantua died on closing day in Miami in 1949 I worked right along side of the gorilla cage selling programs, but believe me, I was one of the last ones to know of his death.

Just before Tuffy Genders hollered doors for the night show, our last of the season, Bill Antes, the radio and t. v. man on the show, came in and said, "Red, what is that newsboy outside shouting?" The kid was hollering, "Read all about the death of Gargantua." We went outside and I bought a paper and that was the first either one of us knew of Gargie being dead. He had died just before the matinee.

Which was the better of the two--opening day which, of course, was also choosing day or was it closing day? When I was just a young gunsel of course it was choosing day, but when I mellowed and had a pretty fat BR, it was closing day.

I remember hearing George Connors make the announcement for the wild west concert on Sparks and then announce, "are there any wrestlers in the crowd?"

I miss those wonderful days in Sarasota when you couldn't walk 100 feet around town without running into another show bum. I miss listening to Jose Tomas, Gargie's keeper, and wondering what in hell he was talking about.

I'd love to see another production number like the one Ringling had after the war with all of these wonderful show girls, every one a real trouper, Laura May, Sleeter, Lola Kay, Gracie, Toni, Dorothy, Elsie, Bella, The Tall Job, Peggy, Fanny, Natalie, Rosa, Kathy, Marion, Rusty, Jenny, Hamburger Mary, Rose, Liz, Ruth, Maxie, Joyce, Jeannie, Bonnie, Esther, Mary, Jane, Sue, Dolly, Lucretia, Loraine, Gena, Rosebud, Yvonne, Charlotte, Habiba, Fatima, Margie, Ala, Sheila, Geraldine, Patty, Sally, Theo, Polly, Mary, Lou, Valerie, Angie, Vivian, Minnie, Hilda, Irene, Emma, Pinito, Babs, Yvette, Norma, Beverly Zofta, Lilli, Glavis, Maggie, Gloria and Bonnie.

And I'd love to hear Big Joe say, "Turn it over Eiffel," while tossing broads on the Gentry show.



# A CANCER REMEDY? "JOIN THE CIRCUS"

BY LANE TALBURT

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Many circus owners have survived financially desperate times because they had an "angel." Frank Felt became a behind-the-scenes figure as he faced near-certain death.

During his first 21-year career as a political analyst for the Central Intelligence Agency, Felt underwent three major cancer surgeries. In 1976 his doctor told him to take medical retirement, go home and get his affairs in order. Instead, he opted to live his remaining time by following a boyhood dream.

He joined the circus—two of them, in fact. He cut his ring teeth managing Circus Kirk for Charlie Boas, and then spent two decades alongside Bob and Doris Earl on Roberts Bros. Circus.

Felt formally retired from his second career in 2002 to his home near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, which he shares with wife Janice and a treasure trove of circus collectibles and memories.

Born in 1926 in Mitchell, South Dakota, he moved at age three with his parents to Sioux Falls. Even though the Great Depression came along and Frank's family—like so many others—found money scarce, his father still managed to introduce him to the circus.

"I remember, being a small boy, his taking me to Ringling Bros. Circus. We sat in the blues at the end, about 15 rows up. As a little six-year-old, I was hanging onto this blue board for dear life.

"And they wheeled the Zacchini cannon in next to us—the family had just come to the United States. And I was very frightened, because this was a huge cannon.

"But that introduction to the circus stuck with me, and I've gone to

every circus I could ever since," said Felt, recalling that his father also took him during the 1930s to see the Al. G. Barnes and Hagenbeck-Wallace circuses.

The extent to which those experiences imprinted on young Frank became more apparent as he grew into adulthood. (Even in recent years, during a visit to Circus World Museum at Baraboo, Wisconsin, Felt still took time to admire that same Zacchini cannon parked on the hallowed grounds of the original Ringling Bros. winter quarters.)

After serving in the Navy during World War II, Felt enrolled at the University of South Dakota in 1946. That's where he met and married the former Janice Goodroad in 1948 and where, a year later, he would receive his bachelor's degree.

Franklin O. Felt, chairman of the 1979 Circus Fans of America convention.



Intending to pursue a career as an educator, Felt taught government and history at the Vermillion, South Dakota high school while completing his master's degree. With four years of classroom teaching under his belt, Felt decided to pursue a Ph.D. degree at Michigan State University. Before he left his native state, however, Felt was also persuaded to become a member of the Circus Fans Association of America by the editor of the Sioux Falls *Argus-Leader*, himself a fan. (Felt's CFA number is 2302. He's a life member of that organization. He also is an active member of Circus Model Builders and Circus Historical Society.)

At Michigan State, Felt moved into veteran's housing and served as a teaching assistant to make ends meet while his wife reared a family that eventually grew to one son and three daughters. His passion for the circus influenced the younger two daughters as they accompanied him to various shows.

While completing his doctorate, Felt had a mysterious, unexpected visitor in his teaching assistant's cubicle at East Lansing. The man flashed his credentials and, speaking in a hushed tone, asked the scholar if he'd like to join the CIA.

"That was back in the days when the CIA was recruiting very covertly," he pointed out. "They didn't advertise in the *New York Times* like they do now."

Earning only \$1,600 at Michigan State and unaware of the higher costs of relocating to Washington, D.C., Felt jumped at the proffered federal salary of \$4,500. He became a political analyst,



sifting through information from various sources and preparing reports on foreign affairs.

Moving to the nation's capital provided him an opportunity to continue seeing almost every circus that came to the area, including Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros, where he met other circus fans. He became active in a CFA tent and helped organize a CMB ring.

During his first overseas assignment to England in 1961, Felt made time to visit the Bertram-Mills Circus in its last year as Britain's only rail show. In fact, he later attended the auction of the railer's equipment. Calling on the Billy Smart Circus, he told a member of the Smart family that "I think it's the biggest circus since I've seen since Ringling Bros. was under canvas. But Ringling has gone into buildings, so I think you've got about the largest circus now in the world." The next time Felt visited a Smart lot, "they had painted 'the world's largest circus' on all their trucks and wagons."

He also took in Chipperfield's and Robert Bros.--"not Roberts Bros. but Robert Bros., which was an English show."

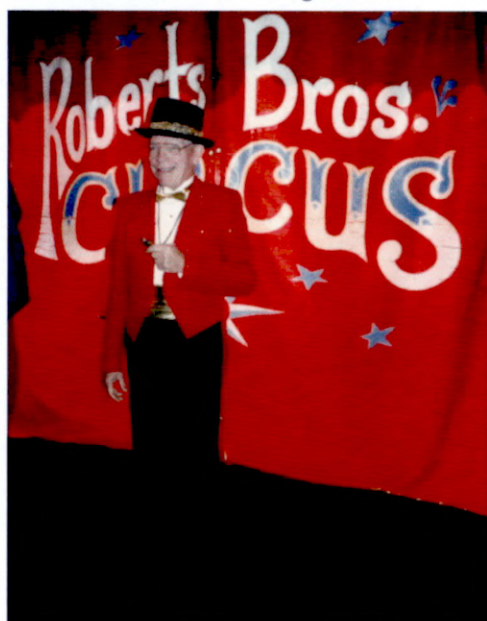
Returning stateside in 1965, Felt moved his family to a small house in McLean, Virginia, near CIA headquarters. He expanded a wall in his home so that he could mount a large 1949 Cole Bros. Railroad Circus poster which he earlier had saved from the trash bin by removing it from a store-front window in Michigan.

The next year, he discovered a dark mole on his right cheek. His doctor sent him to Georgetown Medical Center, where the mole was diagnosed as melanoma cancer. His facial tumor safely removed, Felt returned to his CIA desk. In 1968, he was assigned to Munich, Germany, to be a liaison with German intelligence authorities. To his friends, Felt was simply another American Army civilian employee.

Once again, Felt pursued his circus hobby, frequenting Circus Altoff and Munich-based Circus Krone, which was still making the rounds of Europe on rails. "I counted the railroad cars--I was interested in the logistics--and they had 101 railroad

cars. Of course, they were European-style cars, so they only carried two long wagons per flatcar."

To his surprise, Felt was invited to be the ringmaster for Circus Krone's annual George Washington Day performance, on February 23, for the large contingent of Americans living in the Munich area. Circus management told him, "We need an English-speaking ringmaster, and we think you'd be great. The ringmaster we had last year was terrible. He was a colonel, but he was no ringmaster."



Frank Felt, ringmaster of Roberts Bros. Circus in 1991. Felt collection.

Working from cue cards, Felt introduced the line up of stars, making only one fluff. "And when it was over, my best friend, who was also stationed in Germany and had been sitting in the front row, came over to me and said, 'Frank, you could die tomorrow, because you've been to heaven.'"

That joking prediction almost became reality.

After returning to the U.S. in 1970, Felt was assigned by the CIA to be the liaison officer to the Secretary of Defense at the Pentagon.

"We continued to organize our fans and model builders in the Washington area, and all was going well. I was thinking, 'Well, in about five years I'm going to take retirement, and I'll be set with my federal pension. And I've got my doctorate, so I'll go find a nice quiet college,

because I love teaching.

"But I was sitting in the office one day and scratched behind my (right) ear, and I found a lump. And after that melanoma, I thought, 'Uh-oh.'"

Yet another hospital stay was required to remove a recurrence of melanoma cancer that had spread to his lymph glands "from my ear all the way down through my chest."

After a third operation in 1975, doctors told the cancer victim that a build up of scar tissue would preclude further surgery. "The cancer had spread too far. That was the scary news. It was almost like a death sentence."

On the day he was released from the hospital, still in weakened condition, Felt asked his wife to drive him by the lot in McLean where the Beatty-Cole show was setting up.

Frank told Janice, "It may be the last time I'll ever see the circus. I want to see the big top go up." Seeing Frank in the car, a group of circus fans on the lot gave them their wishes for a speedy recovery.

At home, with his feet propped up in his living room easy chair, Felt heard a knock on the front door. When Janice opened it, a troupe of Beatty-Cole performers and clowns, including Jimmy James, poured in. Felt's circus-fan friend, Frank Ball, a prominent Washington attorney, was responsible for the impromptu appearance. "We knew Frank couldn't make the performance today," Felt remembers the band of merry-makers saying, "so we decided we'd bring the show to him."

Felt took his doctor's advice and applied for medical retirement.

In the meantime, the Felt's 18-year-old daughter, Karen, had joined Circus Kirk for the show's 1975 summer tour. The recovering Felt met and instantly liked the circus's owner, Charlie Boas, whom, he discovered, also had earned a PhD from Michigan State. After teaching at the Michigan school as a full tenured professor, Boas had persuaded his wife and four children to run away and join the circus. They started out with Penny Bros. Circus, which went broke less than six months later, then shifted to the Hugo, Oklahoma,



based shows.

"And I thought that would take more nerve than I ever had, to give up a job like that," Felt mused. As the circus owner's children reached high-school age, Dr. Boas left the road and returned to teaching at York College in Pennsylvania. He could not, however, get the sawdust out of his blood.

Under the initial sponsorship of the Lutheran Church (thus the use of "Kirk," the Scandinavian word for "church"), Boas framed a traditional three-ring show, complete with a big top and side show. Publishing recruitment ads in college newspapers, he selected and trained students to perform the routines and to put and tear down the tent during a three-month summer run.

As fate would have it, Felt had helped Boas book the show into various towns for several years prior to Frank's medical retirement from the intelligence agency.

When Felt's daughter, Karen, spent her first summer on the show in 1975, it featured a full range of clown, acrobatic, aerial and animal routines. Karen performed on the trapeze. Boas had leased Lisa, an Asian elephant, from Dory Miller's Carson & Barnes herd. When not being presented by her Miller-assigned caregiver, Donnie Carr, the bull took her cues in the ring from Bob Cline, a student who auditioned as a low-wire comic performer.

For a salary of \$50 a week and meals in the circus cookhouse, Cline also played trumpet in the band and worked the llamas and ponies in the big top. In the side show he learned the straight-jacket escape, human-blockhead and bed-of-nails routines. In addition, he "arrowed, dumped the doniker, and drove one of the six trucks." At winter quarters on Boas's farm in East Berlin, Pennsylvania, Cline sewed wardrobe and built the side show ticket boxes. He also painted lettering on the trucks.

Cline went on to a professional circus career. He is now a circus historian in South Carolina.

Another student performer on the show was Jim Judkins, who later served as Carson & Barnes general manager and, for the past 10 years, as owner of Circus Chimera.

Felt, while absorbing the physi-

cians' bad news, had a series of heart-to-heart discussions with his wife. He expressed the belief that, if his time on earth were to be cut short, he should spend it doing something he enjoyed—run away to the circus, and Circus Kirk in specific.



Felt with Lisa, the elephant he knew on Circus Kirk.

Although she was not a circus fan, Janice agreed, with one provision—that the couple sell their house in the tony but pricey Washington suburbs, and find a house much further out.

While Mrs. Felt set about house-hunting, Frank bought a motor home and set out in the summer of 1976 to see what road life was like on Circus Kirk. Janice not only sold the old house, but with the proceeds was able to pay cash for a new, larger home near Gettysburg.

"It was a wise move," Felt reflected.

After taking his wife and two girls with him for the remainder of the circus season, Frank found that his new pursuit had made a real difference in his life.

"I felt great. Spending the season on the road, getting up at 5 o'clock and driving to the next town and setting up just agreed with me. I was keeping very busy and having fun."

With no signs of the cancer returning, he was able to go out with Circus Kirk for the 1977 season. This time, however, the fortunes of the show had changed, along with the health of its founder.

The cancellation of a Planters' Peanut contract, which had fed money into the enterprise throughout previous seasons, forced the circus to downsize to one ring. And early in the new season's run, the ailing Boas turned over day-to-day operations to his protégé.

"I had realized my dream; I had a circus to run," Felt enthused.

"So I managed the circus with the help of my two youngest daughters, Karen and Lisa, along with the other kids who had been around for four or five previous seasons and were still there. They could get the tent up, and they could get the show moved. My main job was settling any disputes and keeping a happy family that kept the show rolling along the road. Again, I had more fun, even though it was a huge job.

"There was stress, but it was fun stress," he emphasized. "And at the end of that season, the cancer was gone."

When the circus closed its run in late August, Felt and his family returned home so daughter Lisa could enter high school. The owner made a fateful decision to resume operations under a new title, Boas Bros. With the guiding hand of his son, Charlie Boas Jr., who had been on Circus Kirk, the show started its Golden Tour of the South. Lacking advance bookings and a financial nest egg, Circus Boas ran out of steam and ended in the rain weeks later in Florida. Boas returned Pennsylvania with the moldy tent and road-worn equipment. Like Circus Kirk, Felt was off the road in 1978.

The following year he was persuaded to host the Circus Fans national convention in Gettysburg. He booked the Beatty-Cole show through John Pugh, and despite misgivings by the circus staff, the show performed to two large houses.



Even though Felt was heartened by the success of the CFA convention, he still yearned to run away to the circus.

The fulfillment of his wish came as the result of another stroke of good fortune. Felt took daughter Lisa to a lot near Harrisburg to visit Lisa the elephant, the same Circus Kirk bull which Dory Miller now was leasing to Roberts Bros. Circus. There he encountered owners Robert and Doris Earl. "And they turned out to be the nicest people I had ever met," Felt said.

"Bob told me he was having trouble booking dates and making ends meet."

Once again, Frank stepped in and assumed his role as circus angel, thanks to his having inherited Boas' office records from the now-defunct Circus Kirk.

"So I said to Bob [Earl], 'Just give me your open dates, and I'll see what I can do.'" Relying on Boas's detailed records of towns, and sponsors' phone numbers, Felt said the arrangement "worked like a charm. Bob and Doris had a good contract—no guarantee by the sponsor, just a percentage—and it was easy to sell.

"I helped them out, and they got through the season. They then wanted me to book fulltime for them."

Knowing his own limitations, Felt

decided to concentrate on booking the three-ring show in Pennsylvania, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware and New Jersey. He recommended that circus fans Bob Connors and Wes Herwig book New England, and that the Earls take care of their own booking in the familiar territory of Florida and the Carolinas.

"It worked out real well," Felt said. "The show was saved, and the Earls made money. That was in 1981."

Although Felt initially did most of the advance from his Gettysburg home, the family began wintering near Sarasota, where Roberts Bros. maintained an office in the Earl's home. By this time, the two couples had become close friends, and the following spring they were inseparable as the show left the Gulf Coast on some 20 vehicles to launch its new season.

Driving their pick-up truck, pulling a fifth-wheel trailer, Frank and Janice spent part time on the road. At each lot, they sold tickets and souvenirs and did odd jobs. Felt even served as a ringmaster one season.

Their daughter Lisa, by then a college student, joined their travels for a while. A prime reason was Lisa's desire to renew her acquaintance with Lisa the elephant, who was now in the care of Ken "Turtle" Benson.

Felt recalls that when his daughter

volunteered to help with the elephant, the skeptical Benson replied, "Oh, you think you know how to handle an elephant?" With that, the trainer turned his charge out to pasture to graze, then handed the young Felt his elephant stick with the challenge "go and get her."

"My Lisa went over to Lisa the elephant and said, 'Come on, Lisa, come on.' She wasn't afraid of [the elephant], because she had worked around animals and Lisa [at Circus Kirk]. By golly, Lisa followed her right back. She walked up to Turtle, tossed him the stick and said, 'There.'"

The Felts worked with Roberts Bros. until Doris Earl died in 2002, a total of 21 years of service. Robert Earl had died in 1987.

"I had a full second career with the circus; I lived my dream," Felt said in a 2007 interview. "They told me back in '75 to go home and die, that there was nothing more that they could do because the melanoma had spread to the lymph system. Now here I was 30 years later the picture of health.

"So when I see doctors and they'd look at my chart, they always say, 'My God, man! Do you know how lucky you are?' I respond, 'Oh yes. And I'll give you my cure for cancer:'

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By STUART THAYER

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The first photo is of Roland Tiebor, Sr. and his seals. *Collier's* magazine had a story about Tiebor in its January 1945 issue in which he says that in training, "Use kindness, patience, and lots of fish, but keep your neck away from his teeth. When he bites he means it." This piece of advice would not be lost on me if I were in the seal business.

Roland's seals were with the Ringling show for many years and those of you have seen the movie *Greatest Show on Earth* will recall the opening animal display with Tiebor's seals, Rix's bears and Peterson's jockey dogs. Could you imagine that kind of talent in one display today?

My dad and Roland were friends.



They knew each other from, I think, the Floto show and later while making Orrin Davenport Shrine dates. They were great for cutting up jackpots. I wish I had paid closer attention to their stories.

On Ringling the seal den was always spotted in the back yard rather than in the menagerie for more convenient access to the circus ring so Roland had to have been right in the middle of the 1944 Hartford fire.

Mr. Tiebor's son, also named Roland, worked the act in later years, passing away in the late 1990s. With the possible exception of Jimmy Reynolds, most sea lion guys were

not flamboyant people, rather low key.

I have seen film clips of seals being loaded from their den into a rather large two wheel cart in which they were then transported right up to the back of the ring. This protected their flippers from stubble and debris. I remember Walter Jennier had a long strip of canvas he used for the same purpose. You would think that any animal that bounces around on icy glaciers would have indestructible feet, but apparently not.

Speaking of Jennier, he had a seal lie on its back and Walter would do a handstand on its flippers. My dad mentioned to him that it was the first





time he ever saw that trick and Walter replied, "How many sea lion trainers can do a handstand?"

The next shot is of Tommy Mullins while he was a wrestler in the concert or aftershow on the Sparks Circus in the late 1920s.

For those of you who don't know, it occurred to some showman years ago that after the performance had concluded and the show was being

dismantled, if you removed the general admission seats at the ends of the tent first, the front grandstand would be available for another half hour and if you had something really unique you might be able to sell tickets for an aftershow.

At first it was minstrel or vaudeville numbers with singers, dancers, comics, etc. It was

actually a concert after a fashion and the name stuck. I can't say how it turned into a Wild West show, but it did. Likewise, why a wrestling match was added is equally a mystery other than the fact it was uncomplicated and quick since, after all, the tent was coming down.

With the Cole show in the 1940s, the Wild West people would thunder into the tent and line up on the front

track and tip their hats while being introduced by Col. Harry Thomas. After that Jimmy Ray, who looked about like Mr. Mullins, was introduced and a cash prize would be awarded to anyone who dared to try to last x number of minutes with him.

There was a nice looking, young

guy on the show named Red Robinson who would always be the volunteer and when he was asked if he had ever wrestled before he would answer no, but being an ex-Marine just back from the war, he was familiar with jujitsu. This nugget of information was enthusiastically received by the audience, but violently opposed by Jimmy Ray. Being ever the sportsman, Col. Thomas would leave it up to the audience to decide.

By the time the match finally took place, Otto Griebeling, now in civilian clothes and for a few bucks, served as referee.

Otto, now in make up, and Jimmy posed for this gag photo of Otto about to get the big man to submit. While we are talking about the great Griebeling, I thought this picture of him about to light Kenneth Waite's exploding cigar would be of interest.

The last image is of Paul Nelson, the youngest member of the famous Nelson family of acrobats. Here he is as a kid riding one of Mme. Bedini's horses on the John Robinson Circus in the early 1920s. By the time I knew Paul on the Cole show in the 1940s, one of his sisters, Estrella, had married Zack Terrell, the owner of the show; and another, Hilda, had married Noyelles Burkhart, the manager. Terrell referred to Paul as "Little Jesus" and the fighter Jack Dempsey tagged him "Battling Nelson," after the lightweight champion of the same name. I'm sure a lot of you remember Paul from the Mills Bros. Circus.

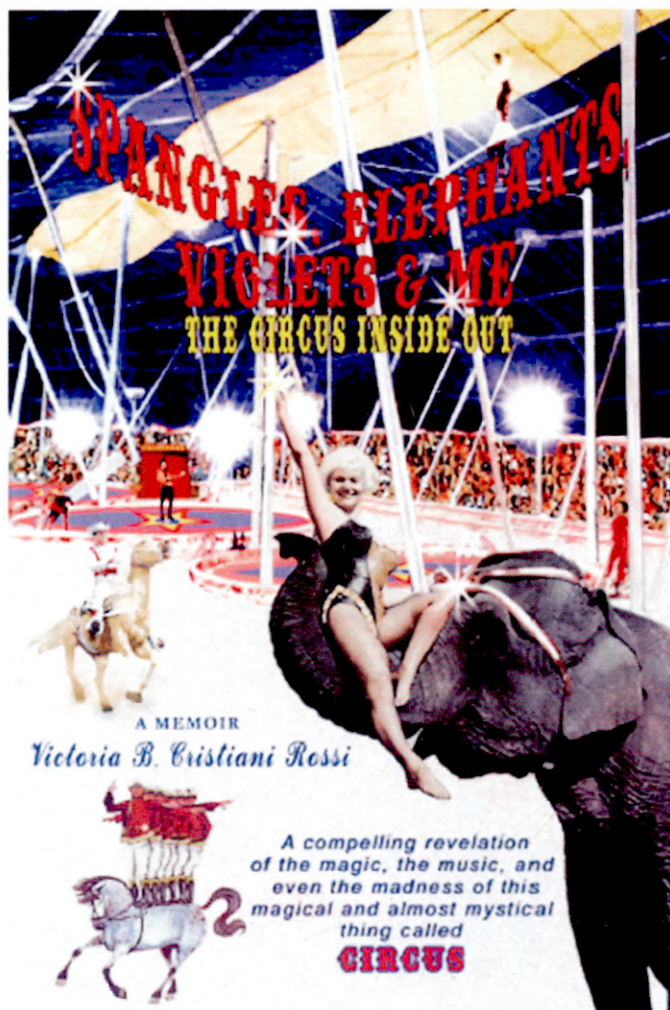




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